



The July obituaries covering the bankruptcy and termination of racing at Rosecroft Raceway barely touched upon its rich history or the contributions of my grandfather William E. Miller and my father, John, to the sport of harness racing. As the fortunate and appreciative beneficiary of their legacy, it is difficult for me to let this event pass without sharing some thoughts on the historical narrative of both these men and the racetrack they founded.

Remembering ROSECROFT



Opening night, May 27, 1949.



SYMBOL GANTLE 1939

Rosecroft Raceway founder W.E. Miller holds his fine trotter Symbol Gantle and his 2-year-old grandson, the author, William E. Miller.

My grandfather W.E., as he was called by his friends, was an indefatigable, enterprising man who loved the sport. The son of a rural school teacher, he arrived in Washington, D.C. in 1898 from a farm in Westmoreland County, Virginia as a young man with virtually no money but a strong desire to succeed. He parlayed the profits from a small concrete business into two furniture stores on Capitol Hill, one of which remained in the family for nearly

one hundred years. By 1907, he was also winning races at the local Brightwood track with his pacer Mary Ellen.

As time and business permitted, my grandfather continued to buy and race trotters and pacers. After his son John (my father) graduated from college in 1932 and joined the business, W.E. spent more time pursuing his love of horses and racing. While often

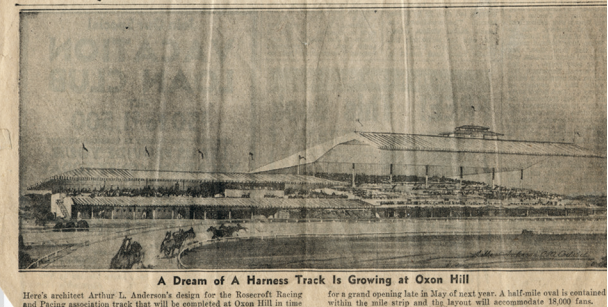
referred to as an "amateur" by the press because he only drove his own horses, no description could be more misleading and incomplete.

For more than 50 years, my grandfather bought, sold, bred, broke, trained and, if need be, shod his own horses. He raced from the sandy, kite-shaped track at Old Orchard Beach, Maine, to the lightning fast clay of The Red Mile in Lexington, and virtually every race track large or small in between taking on Grand Circuit drivers or rank novices with the same verve and competitive spirit. When W.E. was in his seventies, Joe Eyler, with whom he was friendly, asked him to let his fine trotter Breeze Up driven by his wife win the last race of her career in front of hometown fans at the Frederick Fair. His response was that she would win if she was the best that day but would have to do it without his help. Joe was disappointed but not surprised when my grandfather's horse won and Breeze Up was second.

Long before the days of the Interstate Highway System, it is doubtful that many horsemen of any



105,000 to See All-Stars, C



A Dream of A Harness Track Is Growing at Oxon Hill

Here's architect Arthur L. Andrews' design for the Rosecroft Racing and Pacing association track that will be completed at Oxon Hill in time for a grand opening late in May of next year. A half-mile oval is contained within the mile strip and the layout will accommodate 18,000 fans.

By William E. Miller II

era travelled more miles over more two lane roads to win more races at more tracks in more states than my grandfather. In fact, he was the leading driver at Roosevelt Raceway in 1941 and the leading driver in the country in 1949 with an amazing UDR of .629. John Simpson, who worked for him briefly as a second trainer after World War II, was the runner-up.

An event that best captures both the personality of my grandfather and the devotion of my father to him occurred in 1940 at Goshen. My grandfather had one of his best stables that year featuring Symbol Gantle, Pioneer Hanover, Hinieyou, Martin McKinney, Kerr Scott, Banner Hanover, and Peter Gantle.

This was before the perfection of the starting gate and there had been confusion over the introduction of an experimental new starting barrier at Narragansett Park. The following week the addition of a recall bell at Goshen only created more misunderstanding. There were several controversial starts and recalls and a series of \$100 fines and 10 day suspensions levied not only on W.E. but also Ben White, Charlie Fleming, Harry Whitney, and Delvin Miller, all of which greatly angered my grandfather.

Although he rarely drank alcohol, that night at the Orange Inn my grandfather had a few drinks before announcing that he was so disgusted that for \$10,000 he would sell all his race horses. A man quickly presented him with a check over the objection of my grandmother, who protested that her husband was angry and didn't mean it.

But my grandfather stubbornly reiterated: "I said it and this man called me on it. I won't go back on my word. A deal is a deal." Immediately, my grandmother called my father in Washington and explained the situation, saying that his father was beside himself with remorse but would not renege on the deal. She pleaded with him to do something.

Dad drove all night to Goshen. He retrieved the check and, hoping that the man did not keep such a large amount in his checking account, drove to the Yonkers Bank on which the check was drawn. He was the first customer when the bank opened and presented the check for payment. The teller said there were insufficient funds in

the account but he thought the man probably had the funds to cover the draft. My father demanded either immediate payment or for the clerk to stamp the check "insufficient funds." The teller had no choice.

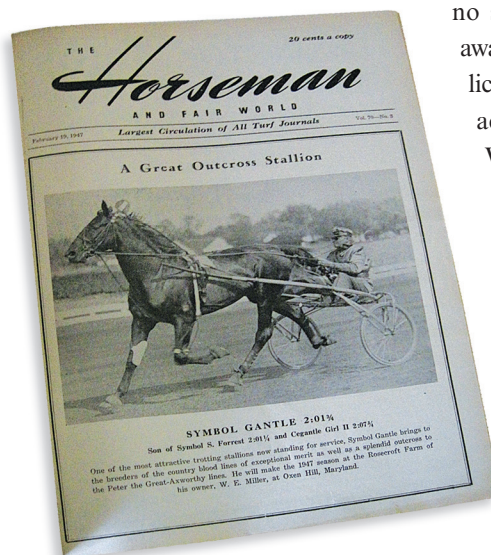
Rushing back to Goshen, Dad got to the barn just as the horses were being loaded onto trucks. He told the grooms to stop loading the horses, that there was no sale because the check had bounced. The presumed new owner objected, saying that he had the money to cover the check in a savings account, but my grandfather said: "So you say. No cash. No sale. No deal. Unload my horses!"

My grandfather had the highest profile of any owner of Standardbred horses in Maryland. He not only trained and raced his own large stable, but he also had established the Rosecroft Stock Farm, where he stood Symbol Gantle and Henry Volo, his best trotter and pacer, and many broodmares. So it was no surprise my grandfather and father were awarded one of the four Maryland pari-mutuel licenses. Rosecroft Raceway was built on 120 acres on one of his farms just outside of Washington, D.C., utilizing a design patterned after picturesque Saratoga Raceway.

Rosecroft opened in 1949 as Standardbreds were making the rapid, improbable transition from a sport racing summer days at county and state fairs for hundreds of dollars to the business of racing nights year round at metropolitan pari-mutuel raceways for millions of dollars. After World War II, Roosevelt and Yonkers Raceway, capitalizing on the devel-

opment of the Steve Phillips starting gate, led the way. Maryland soon followed with four tracks: Rosecroft, Laurel, Baltimore, and Ocean Downs, with each initially allotted 20 nights of racing.

For an impressionable 12 year old in 1949, those were the magical days. Having an up-close and personal view of the men I read about every week in *The Harness Horse* and *The Horseman And Fair World* magazines was a dream come true. Initially, Billy Haughton, Del Miller, Frank Ervin, Curly Smart, Howard Beissinger, Earle



Remembering ROSECROFT

Avery, Frank Safford, and Clay Hammer made Rosecroft their first stop with part or all of their stables when they shipped north in May.

My enduring memories are many: the charismatic Good Time and Frank Ervin as they turned to score down before a race and that mighty little pacer pausing to pose and look at his opponents as if to say: "I'm Good Time. Which one of you guys is going to finish second?"; Tar Heel and Solicitor winning their first pari-mutuel starts, paying a track record \$5.20 Daily Double because Delvin had made no secret of what a great pair of 2-year-old pacers he had; Billy Haughton having the patience to talk to me as if he had nothing else to do; the improbable development of local horseman Earle Wagner's Hi Lo's Forbes into the fastest aged pacer in the country for Henry Clukey; and most of all, Hillsota, purchased by my grandfather at Harrisburg the year before he died, setting a track record of 2:00.4 at Baltimore Raceway with Hugh Bell in the bike, then winning the Roosevelt International Pace for Billy Haughton and later the Great Western Pace at Hollywood Park for Earle Avery.

As the Washington Post chronicled in a Sunday Maryland section, Rosecroft was the social and political center of Prince George's County from the time the track opened in 1949 until the Capital Center arena was built in 1973 as the home for the Washington professional basketball and hockey teams.

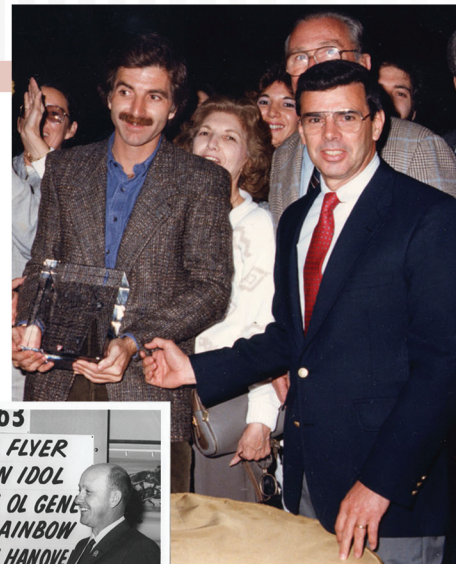
For a time, the box next to my grandfather's on the finish line was reserved by Baltimore Mayor Thomas D'Alesandro for his family of seven, which included daughter Nancy (Pelosi), the future Speaker of the House of Representatives. Before he became President, Lyndon Johnson was an enthusiastic patron. Once he even called from his limousine to suggest in his inimitable fashion that my father hold post time for the first race so that he could bet the Daily Double. As improbable a meeting of two entirely different worlds and generations as one could imagine occurred when Zsa Zsa Gabor chatted up my grandmother at a fundraiser for the Washington Hospital Center.

Before he became President, Lyndon Johnson was an enthusiastic patron.

And then there was the time someone asked if Elizabeth Taylor, who was attending with then husband Senator John Warner, and my mother were sisters. It was a compliment no one in our family ever let her forget. Senator Jennings Randolph of West Virginia was one of our most loyal patrons. Maryland Congressman and former Majority Leader Steny Hoyer represented our district in Congress and was always a loyal friend and supporter.

In 1954, my grandfather died of a heart attack at the age of 75 driving Josedale Alate while in the lead in midstretch at Harrington Raceway. My father, who had been the operational driving force at Rosecroft from day one, succeeded him as president.

No one enjoyed building and running a race track more than my dad. The staff he hired in those early years became legends in the industry: Milt Taylor, the Judge Landis of harness racing; race secre-



Top: William E. "Bill" Miller (and behind him, Earle Brown) presented a Breeders Crown trophy to Bob Boni when Camtastic won at Rosecroft in 1987.



Left: Bill's father, John (left) posed with a trophy and horsemen Billy Haughton and Delvin Miller.

Top Right: John Miller and Zsa Zsa Gabor.

tary and later general manager Jim Lynch; stall man and clerk of the course Joe DeFrank; race secretary Ted Leonard; presiding judge Walter Russell; announcers Roy Schudt and Charlie Hinkle.

My father also was instrumental in the development of Brandywine Raceway, which was built on the Saratoga/Rosecroft model. He persuaded George Weymouth and his group to build their track north of Wilmington (not south, where they had an option on a site) to better access the Philadelphia market. Since the two meets ran consecutively, it was staffed with Rosecroft personnel. Brandywine, of course, was a hugely popular summer destination for decades.

When my father passed away in 1969, advertising executive Earle Palmer Brown was elected president. Among his many talents, Earle was very knowledgeable about Maryland politics. He selected Peter O'Malley, a very bright and politically active attorney, as our legal counsel. They were instrumental in helping pass legislation that increased our racing nights from 48 to 85 and building a state-of-the-art enclosed clubhouse which seated up to 1,200 diners—and later, passing legislation that gave us 145 nights and a reduction of the state tax on wagers.

In 1980, Earle Brown moved to chairman of the board and I became president. I hired Tom Aldrich and Tom Aronson, two young alumni of Stan Bergstein's Harness Tracks of America office, to help deal with the challenges we faced: a longer meet in colder weather, increased competition from the expansion of local and regional gaming, NBA and NHL teams playing just miles away, and diminished media coverage.

Aldrich, our new general manager, and I developed the strategy of starting the meet right after the first of the year but racing fewer nights a week to maximize the weekends; adding more stake races; and simulcasting major races from the Meadowlands promoted as

the “Electric Grand Circuit.”

My 10-year tenure during the 1980s turned out to be a very interesting experience. It coincided with Frank DeFrancis purchasing a bankrupt Laurel Raceway (which was renamed Freestate) and the exciting but, unfortunately, brief renaissance of Maryland racing, as a rare detente in the Maryland racing industry led to the passage of legislation that gave the tracks more days and a reduction in taxes. These developments enabled Rosecroft to host four Breeders Crown races televised on ESPN, add the Messenger and Colonial stake races, purchase Ocean Downs, and establish record handle and profits. It was a very gratifying experience and, ultimately, a very rewarding one for our stockholders. It also afforded me the opportunity to be a member of the Hambletonian Society, where I met so many dedicated people who are devoted to the sport.

At the height of the recovery, our company became a takeover target. While my grandfather and father had initially been the largest stockholders, death, estate taxes, and inheritance issues diluted the Miller block of control stock. It is the fiduciary responsibility of the board of directors to present any viable offers to the stockholders with a recommendation. Financially, there was an all-cash offer that was too good to be refused—as time would later confirm.

The winning bid was from Mark Vogel, a real estate developer who committed to replace the half-mile track with a five-eighths mile oval. He closed the deal in December 1987, paying \$12 million for the track. However, his wealth turned out to be a mirage created by the banking excesses of the 1980s.

It is often the case that takeovers do not go smoothly because the goals and management style of a new and/or novice owner are not the same as those of the founders of a business. Working for Mark, who had no real interest in harness racing other than it being a public relations vehicle for his dream of buying a major league sports franchise, was very different than working with Earle Brown and those steeped in the tradition and culture of Rosecroft. Mark and I had little in common on either a personal or business level. Our relationship steadily deteriorated and ended badly.

I returned to my home in Winchester, Va., so I was not present for the ensuing train wreck surrounding Vogel’s arrest on drug charges and subsequent bankruptcy.

The Cloverleaf Horseman’s Association purchased the track from bankruptcy and made a game but ultimately futile effort to rescue the franchise. However, there were many obstacles, not the least of which was the Maryland Jockey Club’s onerous simulcasting agreement. These events, and the general changing dynamics of racing, especially in a state which ignored the reality of the expansion of gaming at tracks in neighboring states, were serious and perhaps fatal blows.



Being subject to the political whims of a state legislature limits the ability of any track management to totally control its own destiny. For instance, who would have thought that little Charles Town Races would ever offer more purse money than Laurel Race Course or that Harrington and Dover Raceways would thrive while Rosecroft is bankrupt? The primary reason for these counter intuitive situations is different philosophies of the respective states toward the expansion of gaming.

There were many people who spent part or most of their lives contributing to Rosecroft’s success: Pete Shaw, our general manager for 20 years; Francis Spraggins, hired by my father in 1949 as a mutuel clerk and retired in 1990 as my director of operations; Billy Perkins, longtime announcer and race secretary; Danny Herbst, the track superintendent, born and raised on our farm; and, Charlie Brotman, who became the premier sports publicist and public relations personality in Washington, counts Rosecroft as his first client.

Of course, there were also the contributions of thousands of teachers, bank clerks, federal workers, policemen, and students who worked in the mutuel department, as waiters and waitresses in the dining room, and as parking attendants. Rosecroft was a part of many people’s lives, and like me, they remember it best the way it was rather than the way it is.

I understand that virtually every business has a finite shelf life and appreciate the fact that Rosecroft managed to successfully adapt to the changing currents of the sport and the world for half of the 20th century.

Nevertheless, the apparent demise of the track saddens me not only because Rosecroft has meant so much to my family, but also because Rosecroft has meant so much to harness racing and the nation’s capital city. Hopefully, this is not the final chapter and someone who understands and loves racing will rescue the franchise from bankruptcy, create more pleasant memories, and write more chapters.

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