

“Developments in Horse Racing in the Northwestern United States and Western Canada, 1889-1913,”

Myra Davis-Bloom and Barbara A. Davis.

Seattle

Horse racing, along with breeding, showing, and pleasure riding, is big business in the northwestern United States and western Canada. In Washington state alone there are 156,000 horses-ninth largest equine population in the United States; more than \$441 million is contributed to the state's economy each year. Despite the economic impact and relative antiquity of horse sports in the Northwest (native racing predates written history for the region), scant attention has been devoted to its colorful, and in the case of racing, often controversial, history.

About 1889 racing entered its peak years of popularity and prosperity in the Northwest. A succession of world sprint records set on the region's courses marked the onset of this mature period, coupled with the 1889 triumphs of a Montana-bred colt in the Kentucky, Clarke, and American derbies, and with North America's fastest derby of 1891 being run in Spokane, Washington. For most of the next fifteen years, eight to ten large, nationally-sanctioned race courses and dozens of smaller ones offered cooperative scheduling and plentiful racing dates for running and trotting races (and, to a much lesser extent, steeplechasing), as well as good prize money and facilities.

Racing was the Northwest's most popular spectator sport and gambling medium when this period began; it was also a central means of advancing the social status of individuals and groups, and the reputation of cities. Such broad community support not only enhanced racing's profitability but also accelerated growth. After 1900 expansion was fueled too by mining booms in the West and by anti-racing legislation in the East, flooding the Northwest with good horses, sophisticated horseplayers-and a large criminal element. Dozens of fraudulently run small tracks sprang up, and many existing meets, traditionally two weeks long, stretched out to sixty- and ninety-day seasons. This aroused a moral and political reaction: pressure for reform mounted, and was linked with surprising effectiveness to local prohibition, suffrage, and nativist movements.

Not surprisingly, given the surfeit of racing, lack of farsighted leadership within the sport and reform fervor without, Northwest racing's reputation deteriorated more rapidly than was warranted. Between 1908 and 1913, local courses were the scene of some of North America's largest, most honestly and ably managed race meets; simultaneously, effective legislation against racetrack gambling was passed in one area of the Northwest after another. When the large courses closed forever, so too did the region's golden era of early racing.