

Clipping in the Garden Spot: The Hambletonian at Du Quoin 1957–1980

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The Hambletonian is the great racing classic for three-year old trotting horses. It was instituted through the Hambletonian Society, organized in 1923.

The race was named after the Hambletonian (1849-1876), a famous foundation sire of standard-bred horses. Although the Hambletonian never appeared in a race, he did have a highly respectable time trial in the fall of 1852. He went the mile in 2:48 ½.

It took another fifty years or so to reach the elusive goal of the two-minute mile. The first trotter to attain that speed was Lou Dillon in 1903.

Held mainly at Goshen, New York, from 1926 to 1956, the Hambletonian moved to Du Quoin the next year. Instrumental in getting the event for Du Quoin were W. R. Hayes, who died in 1952, and his two sons—H. J. and D. M. Hayes. The elder Hayes built a famous harness racing stable at Du Quoin known as Hayes Fair Acres. One of his trotters, Lusty Song, even took the Hambletonian in 1950.

One horse worth special mention appeared in the 1968 Hambletonian. That was Nevele Pride, driven by Stanley Dancer. Nevele Pride won in straight heats in the times of 1:59.3 and 1:59.2.

Nevele Pride made additional trotting history on August 31, 1969, in Indianapolis, Indiana. He broke the thirty-one-year-old trotting world record of the incomparable Greyhound, winner of the Hambletonian in 1935, who covered the mile in 1938 in 1:5¼. In beating Greyhound's mark Nevele Pride flashed by the finish in 1:54.4.

In 1978 was run perhaps the greatest Hambletonian ever. In the first heat Speedy Somolli with Howard Beissinger in the bike won over Florida Pro in second place in a world record trot for three-year olds of 1:55. In winning Speedy Somolli went the closing half mile in 56.2, the fastest such clip ever at Du Quoin.

In the second heat Florida Pro, driven by George Shely, won in 1:55. In the stretch Speedy Somolli and Florida Pro were neck and neck with the latter finally nipping the former at the wire by a nose.

In the third heat Speedy Somolli won the Hambletonian with a time of 1:57. Brisco Hanover, another excellent trotter, finished second with Florida Pro third. Those three heats were the fastest ever run in trotting history.

The last year for the Hambletonian at Du Quoin was 1980. Many people over the years had enjoyed the race in the rural setting of southern Illinois. Perhaps the ghost of Greyhound was there too in a place that might well be denoted the garden spot.