

THE HUB OF THE UNIVERSE

Sports arenas can be mighty important to people. A harness track can be just as meaningful to someone who follows the horses as is Yankee Stadium or Shea to a baseball fan. Goshen's Good Time Park was so much a part of the life of one man, during the years he watched the Hambletonian Stake there, he wished to become a part of the track even after his death. And so his ashes were spread over the turf from the back of a sulky, as a trotter was jogged down the homestretch.

Like that man, Good Time Park is now only a memory. The barns are gone; the grandstand removed; and nature is in control once again. The big open field waits patiently for a developer's shovel.

And so it was for Billings Park, outside Memphis, Tennessee, 94 years ago. Here was a place one horseman called "the hub of the universe." The man who coined the name could afford to talk like that: he possessed a generous supply of the world's money at the time. This was C.K.G. Billings who was diversification personified. He not only controlled Peoples' Gas Company of Chicago - if you wanted to cook and stay warm in the Windy City, you bought your gas from Peoples' - he had other farflung interests, many of them in Memphis.

Billings name first began to surface in harness racing circles in 1899 when a pacer of his - Bumps, by name - lowered the world's wagon record. Now, these were not wagons you see on old re-runs of Gunsmoke - the kind that fetched the weekly supply of foodstuffs for man and beast. These were sleek speed wagons with four low bike-wheels and they could have been driven by a pro. But C.K.G., himself, drove them and got so good he could have made his living at it. But with all his money he didn't find it necessary to spend his life looking at the rear end of a horse. Instead, he chose to remain an amateur.

Amateur racing was big stuff in early 20th century America. The New York Speedway was going strong; matinee clubs were flourishing; and to own a good trotting horse was a step up the social ladder. Billings and others like him stood on the top rung. And this love of the sport led him to build a showplace called Billings Park.

The ground was broken for the park in the spring of 1901; and the paint was still drying on the grandstand when the inaugural meeting was launched the following October 21. The Park was one of the "seven wonders of harness racing." (Don't ask me to name the other six.) It was what we would call today: state of the art. In 1901 they called it "in apple pie order."

Memphis immediately became a trotting center, its climate permitting year-round training. The fast track and generous purses attracted the best trotters and pacers to Billings Park. But the following year - the track's second season - something happened which caused "the hub of the universe" to go spiraling into outer space.

There were plenty of races for the amateurs, among them the Memphis Gold Cup for free-for-all trotters boasting a \$5,000 trophy offered by the association. The only starters that season were Lord Derby, owned and driven by E.E. Smathers, and The Monk who was driven by his owner C.K.G. Billings. The two men had been strong rivals all season, both enjoying their share of victories. Smathers had no trouble claiming the first Gold Cup race, taking both heats easily.

Then came 1903, a dream-come-true year when a little mare named Lou Dillon became the first two-minute trotter. C.K.G. owned Lou Dillon and in the wagon, behind the mare, won the Gold Cup in a walk, literally. With Smathers and Major Delmar still up the track, C.K.G. walked his new champion across the finish line. The next time they met would decide who kept the cup.

Lou remained in Memphis that winter and when shipped north to Detroit in late spring, she became ill, causing morning papers to headline: Lou Dillon Dying. Reports of her death fortunately were greatly exaggerated, but the champion was definitely off her form. Meanwhile, Major Delmar was racing sensationally. A few days before the third and final Gold Cup meeting, Lou Dillon was pronounced fit. To keep her that way, a guard was stationed at her stall the night before the race.

Major Delmar won the first heat of the 1904 Gold Cup by ten lengths, Lou Dillon nearly collapsing on the track. Billings simply walked the mare around the mile the second time out; Smathers jogging to a win. Billings was gracious in defeat, but was rewarded when Lou Dillon returned to her championship form a few days later. However, the entire episode, filled with suspicion, was enough to cause E.E. Smathers to sell his horses and disappear from the sport. Racing disappeared, too, from Billings Park following the 1904 meeting when Tennessee banished public wagering.

The Park, used for training during the next quarter century, gradually eroded until it closed for good in 1930 to await the developers' shovel - the same year Good Time Park welcomed the Hambletonian Stake and became the new "hub of the universe."