

## **It's All Fun and Games**

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According to several early accounts, life for Whiting's settlers was very hard and quite dull. The barrenness of the landscape led to several bouts of homesickness. Few towns in the Calumet Region were as desolate as Whiting, Indiana in the 1890s. As a result, organizations were founded in order to create some form of social activities and enjoyment.

In the early 1890s bicycle riding was a favorite pastime of the young men and women of the Whiting community. U. G. Swartz's discusses this fad in his essay titled "Some early days of Whiting Refinery," "Although the roads were poor and the cinder paved way was rough, enthusiastic bicyclists sought pleasure in riding." Once Oliver Street was opened and covered with slag, a continuous course was made possible.

The bicycle route ran from Oliver Street through Center Street to Berry Lake, which covered a distance between 1 and 2 miles. Swartz continued by stating, "There were no lights along the way nor was the path an ideal one, but Summer nights were full of pleasure as the crowd wheeled from Oliver Street to Berry Lake and from Berry Lake back again to Oliver Street, repeating this trip till darkness drove them away."

Also, at this time, bicycle racing was quite popular. Seldom did a weekend go by when there were not match races. Hundreds of spectators would line up to watch the races that ran from Whiting to Hessville. According to the 1939 *Whiting Times* Historical Edition, "The writer recalls one particular race, a grudge race that had been arranged between Al Bumhour and George Girard, Jr., after which considerable money changed hands when Girard nosed out Bumhour in a grueling finish."

It was also not uncommon for bicyclists to venture outside of Whiting on a Sunday morning. Riders would enjoy the boulevard and parks of the area alongside other two-wheeled enthusiasts. The new riding surfaces served as a contrast to the cinder paths that Whiting's settlers were accustomed to. However Swartz claimed that overcoming the adversarial terrain was part of the fun. "But difficulties added zest to the enjoyment, and friendly associations relieved the tedium of shut-in days."

Dog races were another popular pastime in Whiting's early days. Many of Whiting's prominent citizens owned dog kennels. Harry Kilcullen and the Donegans were noted dog fanciers. Likewise, these individuals' dogs were some of the fastest greyhounds around. The races were held in a field, which later was developed into the West Park residential addition. As was common, in the early stages of dog racing, a live rabbit was used to set the greyhound's pace.

In addition, horse racing was also popular in the Whiting - Robertsdale area. At one time, there were three tracks, one in Roby, Five Points and Sheffield addition. Because of State legislature it was necessary to construct the three racing tracks. The law stated that racing was only permitted for 30 days in a row. By creating three tracks, racing promoters were able to keep the horses running continually throughout the summer.

One of the top horses, during this period, was William Vater's "Elector." In addition, to being one of the crowd's favorite, he was actually quite skilled in running the track. According to the 1939 Historical Edition of the Whiting Times, "He (Elector) demonstrated his worth when he beat Lieut. Gibson." Lieut. Gibson was the 1900 winner of the Kentucky Derby.

Many of Whiting's youths of that time earned extra money working for the various tracks. The young men were hired to lead the thoroughbreds from the unloading platforms at the tack

factory to the horse tracks. Likewise, several men made money at the tracks at the betting windows. When gambling was prohibited by the State, the tracks were eventually closed down.

At the turn of the century prizefighting took hold over the Region's entertainment. Members of the Chicago syndicate built a boxing arena near Indianapolis Boulevard and 165<sup>th</sup> Street. Prizefighting was banned in Illinois, so the leaders of the underworld took advantage of their proximity to Indiana. The area soon became a Mecca for gamblers and hoodlums and it was not too long before the state militia was sent in to stop the arena from operating. Shortly after the militia left town a suspicious fire burned the arena to the ground.

Over the short period of time that the arena existed many great prizefighters made an appearance in Roby. The small village saw the likes of "Billy" Woods, "Buffalo" Costello, Solly Smith, Jimmy Griffin, Paddy Smith, "Young" Corbett, Peter Maher, Val Flood, Jimmy Berry, and Pete Shea. The last fight held at the arena was a bout between Dan Creedon and Aleek Greggains. Greggains won the fight in 15 rounds.