

## **Roby** **“The Biggest Little City in Indiana”**

You may have noticed a lot of activity in the extreme northwest corner of Hammond, Indiana. This part of town is currently the location of Walmart, and it will soon be home to several new commercial developments. However, this area that borders the banks of Lake Michigan was once known as Roby. The site was named after Edward H. Roby. In 1873 Roby purchased approximately 600 acres of land in this area from Caroline Forsythe. The first white settlers to inhabit Roby were fugitives on the run from Chicago. Because Roby was nothing more than a wasteland, the village became a convenient refuge for the criminal element.

Roby achieved national acclaim in 1880. That year the Roby post office opened for business. The village of Roby became famous for operating the smallest post office in America. Early postmasters included: John S. Field, who became president of the Knickerbocker Ice Company; John J. Forsythe, son of Jacob Forsythe; John Kreuter, known hunting lodge proprietor; Thomas Muldoon and John Briggs.

On July 31, 1892 reporters at Chicago’s Rock Island station witnessed 20 members of the Levee Society boarding a train headed for the Indiana state line. The Levee Society was a notorious gambling syndicate, which operated out of the “windy city.” Prince Hal Varnell and Blind John Condon headed the group. Other leading members of the syndicate were as follows: J. A. Webb, George Middleton, Paddy Ryan, Edward Fuller, John Morris, J. Franks, Charles Gross, Ike Lansing, C. L. Crane, and Stunt Maxwell. When asked by a reporter about their plans, a spokesman raved about the creation of a gambler’s paradise.

Archibald McKinlay in his pictorial history of Whiting titled *Oil and Water* discusses the syndicate’s plan to establish a resort community. A spokesman was quoted as saying, “We intend to build a lakeside resort community, complete with living accommodations and a variety

of amusements . . . A large summer hotel will front a stretch of bending shore where surf dashes up with perpetual music on sand as fine and white as sugar.” He went on to exclaim, “With its races and its summer hotel and excursion steamers, the place will be the Coney Island of the West.”

The promoters of this gambler’s paradise planned to build a variety of entertainment venues. One of the venues planned was a boxing arena that could accommodate 6,000 spectators. There would also be a casino capable of holding 1,500 gamblers. And, to top-it-off, the promoters planned on constructing a horseracing track, the very inspiration for the resort. In addition, there was to be a horse riding stable, which provided city slickers the opportunity and thrill of riding horseback.

The Levee Society acquired the land from Robert Roby. Roby was a Chicago lawyer, who was the attorney for the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne and Chicago Railroad, which represented the western leg of the Pennsylvania Railroad. The group used 120 acres to construct the horse track. The track’s western boundary - and the backstretch of the racetrack - was the state and city line. The state line ran from 107<sup>th</sup> to 112<sup>th</sup> Streets. The eastern border was the rail lines of the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne and Chicago; The Lake Shore and Michigan Southern; and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.

As a result of the land sale, Roby became the domain of three Garfield park (Chicago) partners. They were as follows: Harry “Prince Hal” Varnell, Blind John Condon, and George “Boss” Hankins. Each partner was known in Chicago as a proprietor of houses of chance. However, as the 19<sup>th</sup> Century came to a close, the popularity of horse betting began to grow. This change in the betting habits of gamblers initiated the Garfield Park partnership. After the merger, the group incorporated as the Columbian Athletic Club.

The partnership first ventured into an outdoor gambling venue, when they leased the Garfield Park racetrack. The group acquired the track from Lambert Tree. The partnership transformed the site into an outdoor casino. Once the partners felt the pressure from Chicago's lawmen, they decided to move east. Roby was a much more suitable environment to run an illegal gambling empire. In addition, the syndicate controlled all of the gambling revenue in Roby, by only permitting its own bookmakers to operate at the track.

The Columbian Athletic Club had an extreme amount of power and influence over Lake County. The gambling syndicate was described as the Roby Octopus. The group's tentacles were seen in both the political and business arenas. Anyone who became coerced by the Roby Octopus was said to be "robbyized." In addition, every newspaper in Hammond, except for a lone German publication, was said to be on the gambling syndicate's payroll.

It was at this time that the goings on in Roby was brought to the attention of Indiana's statehouse. Indiana Governor Claude Matthews feared that the stain on his state's northwest corner would damage his spotless political record. The Governor quickly learned that Indiana had been hosting Chicago's most high-profile gambling syndicate. For Matthews, this was a horrifying development. Without consulting Indiana's governor, the Columbian Athletic Club had set up shop on Matthews's turf. The Roby syndicate had not only erected a horseracing track, but they had also constructed a prize-fighting arena to entertain the spectators when the ponies weren't running.

At this time, Chicago had banned prize fighting, as had Indiana. However, Indiana did permit exhibitions of the "manly art of self-defense." This loophole allowed Roby's boxing arena to emerge. In fact, during the Worlds Columbian Exposition, visitors packed trains and

trolleys to come to Roby for boxing exhibitions. The Columbian Athletic Club went on to house many memorable displays of the “manly art of self-defense.”

When the gambling syndicate took out advertisements in an Indianapolis newspaper, promoting a prizefight in Roby, Governor Matthews had enough. The Indiana Governor was forced to finally act on these indiscretions. Matthews knew he had to be patient in order to take full advantage of this opportunity and to make the greatest impact. Governor Matthews chose Labor Day 1893 to attack the Roby Octopus. On that day, a record crowd of spectators was on hand to view Young Githo take on Kid Lavigne. The Indiana Governor sent two companies of militia to Roby to close down the arena.

As soon as the militias left town, gambling resumed in the arena almost immediately. However, the governor got what he wanted, his constituents now knew that he would not allow Chicago’s criminal element to infiltrate Indiana. However, the arena and racetrack continued to draw in record crowds. On Sundays approximately 1,500 eager gamblers crowded in to find a spot at the casino tables or in the grandstand. Special trains were operated from Chicago filled with customers waiting to tempt lady luck. The *Whiting Sun* described these visitors to Roby, “It’s the same old crowd that used to infest upper Clark Street, sullen, loud, noisy, and glum at the law which drove them into the wilderness and across the prairie to carry on their business.”

In August 1895, a fire broke out suddenly at Professor James Robertson’s hotel. The hotel was located adjacent to the Roby boxing arena. The fire was the result of an explosion from a gasoline stove located in the hotel. Soon, the blaze spread next door to the arena. The arena was a mere shell and was as dry as tinder. In moments the flames spread through the entire structure. Fifteen minutes after the fire started, the arena roof had fallen in and all that remained was ruins. Professor Robertson was in Boston at the time of the inferno. Neither the hotel nor

the arena was insured. The estimated loss of the two structures was between \$20,000 and \$60,000. At the time of the fire, the arena was the property of Mrs. Roby, who obtained possession of the boxing venue after the Columbian Athletic Club failed to pay her a rental fee for use of the arena's grounds.

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.

In 1895, the State of Indiana passed a law that required that horseracing be limited to 15 days on any one track. In addition, 30 days needed to pass before races could resume on a horse track. Therefore, the gambling syndicate built two additional tracks: Lakeside and Sheffield. There was a track where North Lake Avenue is today, and one where George Roger Clark High School now stands. As a result, racing could keep going year round in Roby. After fifteen days, the races were moved to a new racecourse.

The Roby racetracks caused another problem for Indiana legislators in the selling of pools. Indiana's politicians had prohibited the sale of pools in 1892. However, the political leaders never defined the terms of the law. The legislators declared the sale of pools to be a sin, but failed to describe the sin. Once again the criminal element took advantage of a loophole to turn a quick profit.

The sale of pools took place in poolrooms. A poolroom would take a bet on a horse race that was run in a different city. The poolroom would then send the bet via telegraph. Indianapolis police had trouble arresting the proprietors of poolrooms, because there was not a

good grasp of the law. The poolroom owner fought any attempts of prosecution by stating that the money was not bet in Indiana, but it was placed in another state by wire.

For several years local courts throughout Indiana couldn't agree on the meaning of the state law. Therefore, Indianapolis police found no reason to enforce the ruling. So, the sale of pools and the business of poolrooms operated uninterrupted. That was until the presence of Roby and the entrance of Big Jim O'Leary.

In 1895 O'Leary decided to open a poolroom in Roby. Big Jim was a leading figure of the South Side of Chicago's underworld. However, not everyone was happy with O'Leary's arrival. After sometime, the presence of Big Jim had violated the morals of some of Hammond's more prominent residents. In September 1895, Lake County Sheriff Benjamin F. Hayes, along with Deputy Malo, paid a visit to Roby. The two lawmen raided the Brennan poolroom but failed to stop off at Big Jim's place. This decision inspired Silas Swaim, editor of the Lake County News, to write that the raid was nothing more than an attempt to grandstand.

Racing and the sales of pools continued for the next few years. However, the majority of the horse races were held at the Lakeside track. In 1902, a Chicago newspaper described the Roby track. "Lakeside is the most original track not only around Chicago but almost any place in the United States. To say it is primitive would be mild. It manages to get along without a grandstand. It maintains the old-fashioned syndicate-betting ring now to be found nowhere else except in Charleston, South Carolina; Atlanta, Georgia; and Rome, Italy. But Lakeside had a good track, a safe track, and likewise a sure one."

Three years later the era of large-scale gambling came to an end in Roby. In 1905 the Indiana General Assembly forbade the betting on horse races. At the same time, Governor J. Frank Hanly dismissed Hammond's police commissioners and appointed a new board to enforce

the laws. The governor cited political corruption as the reason for the dismissals. The new officials acted immediately. Soon, all gamblers and proprietors were driven back across the state line into Illinois.