

**Roby**  
**“The Biggest Little City in Indiana”**  
**Part Two**

And now the continuation of the history of Roby, Indiana!

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.