

Excerpt from

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*Storyteller: Gladys S. Adams  
from The Manchester Herald*

### A GRAND DAY AT THE RACES

**1889-1909:** Twenty years of "oat races."

Manchester Driving and Agricultural Assoc., founded June 1889, created Woodland Park on thirty acres of land on Woodland Street where a half-mile track, two paths containing thirty-six stalls, a covered grandstand with a seating capacity of five hundred and a judges stand were installed. The whole thing was enclosed by a board fence seven feet high. The park was located near present Turnbull Street. Broad Street didn't exist then.

Officers: Pres., W.W. Cowles; V.P., A.L. Taylor; Treas., C.W. Cowles; and Sec., C. D. Tucker who was station agent for the New York and New England Railroad.

Harness racing was a popular sport at that time in Manchester, and it belonged to the Eastern Connecticut Trotting Circuit which included Manchester, Rockville, Brooklyn, Norwich, Willimantic and Stafford.

There were two types of races: one, called oat matinee, featured local horses with the owners driving their own sulkies. The winner was paid in oats, twenty bushels for first, fifteen for second, etc. The second type was a two-day event with entries from other towns competing with the Manchester horses. The results of these races were published in full in the Hartford Courant.

**October 3, 1889:** "Special purse will be given for double team race for town horses, best two in three. Admission to the park twenty-five cents. Ladies, teams and stockholders free. Children half price. Buses will leave from Depot Square and Cheney's store to accommodate any wishing to attend."

**May 1890:** "Trotters are out at Woodland Park. Allen Bros., Clarence and George, who operate the Cowles Hotel and Stables, were at Woodland Park with their four-in-hand hitched to a scraper and before

noon the track was in good condition. Shortly after noon, local horses in sulkies could be seen going to the track."

**January 1892:** Manchester Driving and Agricultural Assoc. met at Patten & Brown's hall with twenty-five stockholders present. Officers elected: J.J. Strickland, A.L. Taylor, C.H. Strant and George Allen. Directors: R.N. Strong, G.F. Day, A. W. Hollister and F.S. Wood.

**Hartford Courant July 1892:** "Before Woodland Corp. was established three years ago there was not a horse in town that had a record and a pedigree and trotting stock was unheard of." "The number of horses in town has greatly increased and Manchester Hackney Stud has been started since the track was built. There is not a community in Connecticut with a territory equal to Manchester that can boast of so many fine-blooded horses."

There was a grand celebration on Fourth of July 1892 at Woodland Park including trotting races and foot races, a balloon launch, a parachute jump and shore dinner.

The big event of the season was the Horse Fair. Entry cards for Eastern Conn. Trotting Circuit had been sent to horsemen in August and on September 7 & 8 the circuit opened two days of competition at Woodland Park, all racing rules under the National Assoc.

The track was in tip-top condition and heats were run, bets were made, prizes given while the crowd in the grandstand shouted and cheered. The first day was topped off by a dance at Apel's Opera House.

On the second day, there were sulky, foot and bicycle races, a baseball game, sometimes a greased pig was let loose. Prof. Northrup took to the air in his balloon. Manchester was the first of the Eastern Conn. Circuit to host the Horse Fair. The other member towns followed, one each week, for a total of six Horse Fairs.

For various reasons, the Manchester Driving and Agricultural Assoc. was reluctant to plan anything for the Fourth of July 1896, but G.H. Allen and J.F. Sheridan leased Woodland Park for the day and announced "classes will be 2.25 and 2.49 with a purse of two hundred dollars for each class and three minute class for one hundred bushels of oats." There were bicycle races and a football game between South Manchester and the Broadbrooks.

The Manchester Driving and Agricultural Assoc. was plagued by those in town who felt that a race track was not a good influence and the association went out of business. And the trolley had come to Manchester and with it the trolley resort at Laurel Park, which, being on the trolley line was more accessible.

Another blow was the death of Clarence W. Allen in June 1898, age forty-three. He was a leader and a horse lover. He came to Manchester at age fifteen to work for Col. P. W. Hudson and later he and his brother George ran Cowles Hotel and Stable. He was president of the Trotting Assoc., North Manchester's first fire chief and a lieutenant on the staff of Major Warren of the First Company, Governor's Horse Guard.

**Aug. 1901:** Horse racing at Woodland Park is to be revived. Two classes 230 open and three minutes for town horses. Prizes fifty bushels of oats each. A ball game is planned.

**Dec. 1901:** F.B. Horton purchased Woodland Park land from C.W. Cowles, a double tenement to be built. The end of an exciting era in Manchester's history.