

The Erlanger Fairgrounds

February 20, 1906 to February 1924

by Patricia Hahn

During the Month of September Erlanger usually had festivities. 109 years ago when transportation was still in the horse and buggy stage and today's concrete and blacktop highways were loose rock and dirt pikes, the Kenton County Agricultural Association, which operated the Erlanger Fair, was incorporated. The original members of the Association were S. W. Adams, J. P. Riffe, H.G. Blanton, E. T. Gale, and L. T. Rice.



The gate to the Fairgrounds

From February 20, 1906 to February 1924 the annual fair, which was held in September for four days and attended by thousands of people, featured the activities of the incorporation which were a display room under the grandstand where the best cooks of Erlanger and surrounding area displayed their finest cakes, cookies, bread, rolls, candy, jellies jams, and canned fruits and vegetables. The seamstresses displayed their best quilts, crocheted pieces, fancy work and other handiwork. Close by were crated and pens of chicken, ducks, geese and rabbits. Farm animals of every kind and breed were displayed in the show ring in front of the grandstand on different days. The judging of these entries was always a hotly disputed contest with only the winners agreeing with the judges. The blue ribbon was first place, the red ribbon was second place and yellow ribbon was third place. The awards were greatly prized.

Trots/Harness races, running races, chariot races with men dressed as Roman Gladiators, women racing in small light carts and mule races were held before the later coming of the motorcycle and auto races. The mules were farm mules ridden by farm boys in overalls.



The stands and the race track

The little town of Erlanger was entertaining thousands of people from Cincinnati, Covington, Newport and the bordering counties. The 1st fair on September 12, 1906 saw a beautiful sunny day. Many came in automobiles and pretty runabouts and traps. The track, a half mile round, was the feature of the Fair and the races, trotting and pacing and running kept the crowd interested all the time. The fair was one of the biggest ever held in this vicinity and the Directors were pleased with the showing. The Southern Railroad made a special rate to Erlanger on account of the Fair and hundreds took the opportunity of visiting Erlanger in that way. It was only a 20 minute walk from the depot to the Fair

Grounds, but for those who did not care to walk there were wagons galore, for which a small fee was charged. And there were automobile lines running from the end of the Ft. Mitchell car line to the grounds. The Lexington-Pike had been oiled, and there was no dust, and this feature attracted a great many motorists.



Trot/Harness race

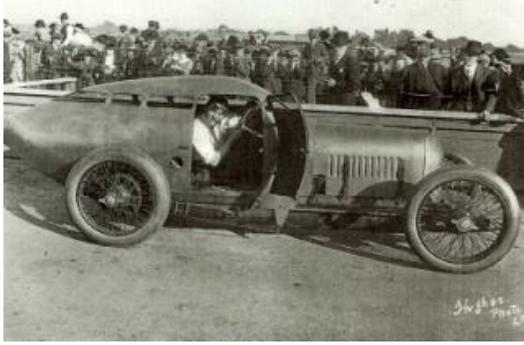
On September 15, 1906 the final day of the 1906 Fair the Erlanger Derby was run. George Taylor, one the highest salaried jockeys in the world and who rode for the Lorillard Stables had the mount on The Laurel. He won the first Erlanger Derby. Lorillard Stables were one of the most renowned race horse breeders in the country. They had won the Belmont Stakes in previous years.



Many well known people came to Erlanger, KY to participate in the Fair. On August 7, 1914 Lincoln Beachey , well known aviator and Barney Oldfield, world champion auto driver raced on the track at the Erlanger Fair. These features attracted thousands of visitors.



Lincoln Beachey



Barney Oldfield

The Local ambulance was always on hand when the motorcycle races and auto races were run an ambulance was used many times during the years to take injured men to the hospital.

The merry –go round, Ferris wheel, swings and various other rides had a constant line of customers waiting their turn. Sideshows of every type were present with their barkers and outside “tease act” to attract the crowds. In a Kentucky Post Newspaper article of 1908 it said “One feature at the fair is a three legged child, aged 2 years and very bright”.

In 1909 the Chief of Police, D. G. Reasonover stated that his men swooped down on several crapshooters, shellworkers and other card sharks and made them go to the area of tall and uncut timber. The chief’s instructions were to break up all gambling devices, and if his force be insufficient, he would put on more men.

Families took their picnic baskets filled with fried chicken, country ham, homemade breads, cakes, pickles and other delicious food , and spent the day, always taking enough for two meals and then in the early evening hurrying the family home so they could get the milking done before dark. In the early years the fair always closed before dark since there was no electricity.

On Sunday mornings after the fair had closed the night before, the neighborhood children would go to the fairgrounds and hunt for money or any other treasures that might have been left behind.

In the 1920’s the Erlanger Fair Association was sinking into financial problems. Several years of rain during the dates of the Fair caused the decline. In a last ditch effort to keep the fairgrounds from bankruptcy on July 7, 1925 the Erlanger Kennel Club brought Greyhound Dog racing to the Fairgrounds. The “dog racing era” brought many unused stables, sheds and other shelters all over Erlanger to use to house the dogs.

Fame of the Erlanger oval was far reaching. It was the fourth establishment of its kind in the United States to use the mechanical “bunny” as a lure for the greyhounds and from the standpoint of attendance and play, was regarded as the most successful track in the country at that time. O. P. Smith, Oakland, California was the inventor of the dummy hare system.

As many as ten thousand people attended the races nightly and when the crowd left the grounds traffic was tied up in all directions for several hours.



Crowds at the Dog Track

It was said that the Erlanger Course took in \$440,000.00 in the single season it operated. The races ran a total of 44 days. A 95 cent admission was charged and an estimated amount of \$8.00 was spent by each person attending nightly.

Erlanger Residents complained about the traffic and the vicious dogs that attacked their pet dogs. The dogs were not vicious with people.



Possibly Andy Scheben and his winning Greyhound

a Kentucky bred dog that equaled the world record when it won the derby by clipping off three-eighths of a mile in 39 and 1/5 seconds.

Since dog racing found so much favor with the sporting public, Kentucky has added to its reputation for fast horses that of fast greyhounds.

The dog running under the name of Dry Creek was raised at Erlanger by Andy Scheben Jr. breeder of thoroughbred greyhounds. Scheben also owns a number of other racing hounds besides Dry Creek. The winner's little brother Swift and Sure ran fourth in the same race.

I tried to find out from Jack Scheben and Patricia Scheben Butcher if either of the men in the photo was Andy Scheben. They were not sure about the identity. But Jack had a reminiscence about his Uncle Andy that I thought I would share. Jack's story: *"When the Scheben's killed their hogs during the cold weather, Uncle Andy's dog pens were always involved. Since the cages were extra tall they served as work stations for the men to cut up the pork into various pieces. Usually, one would find one of the dog trophies located near-by and filled with an appropriate warmer-upper drink; not coffee. Of course my brother Fred and myself were too young to taste the contents. With all of the knife cutting, I am surprised that there wasn't more cut hands. Everything was done outside in the cold, but one kept active doing various chores and didn't seem to mind the cold. Along about 1:30 p.m. enough sausage had been ground so that the ladies could fry-up some patties. Boy was that good!"*

Proceedings were brought against the track under state gaming statues after only one season. In litigation which followed operators of the track held that the law did not apply to betting at a regular race track during races and that this applied to dogs as well as horse racing. On November 3, 1925 the court finds the defendants are maintaining a nuisance and that the use of the premises for this purpose is unlawful. On motion of Commonwealth Attorney Orie S. Ware, who brought the suit for injunction against the defendants, the court granted a permanent injunction preventing further use of the premises for gambling. The case went to the Court of Appeals and to the Kentucky Supreme Court but the injunction was upheld.

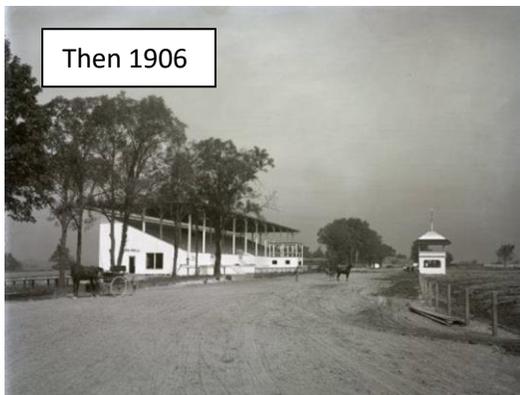
The government then took over the grounds for a few years and bred horses there.

For a number of years the fairgrounds had no definite use. In the winter the neighborhood people would ice skate on the three ponds.

There is only one home on Queen Street in Erlanger. Such an interesting story exists about this one time log cabin home. Joe Carter was groundskeeper for the Erlanger Fairgrounds and lived in a small cottage located on the grounds. It was a log cabin with a large stone chimney. After the sale of the Fairgrounds property the new owners sold this log cabin to Joe Carter. He and his brother cut the cottage in half, purchased the land on Queen Street and moved the cottage to the present site of 3218 Queen. Joseph B. Carter lived in the cottage until his death in March of 1972. This small cottage is probably one of the only things remaining from the Fairgrounds. The exterior is now covered with wood siding but on the inside logs are still exposed.

In 1943 the Erlanger-Elsmere Board of Education purchased thirty acres of the fairgrounds. In 1951 the first of the ice skating ponds was filled and a football field was built over it. The noises of the old county fair, the yells of the racing fans and sounds of over one hundred years ago gave way to the cry of the hot dog vendor and yells of the students cheering their team to victory. The school was built. Then a baseball field and a tennis court were built. In 1956 the dedication the present Lloyd Memorial High School took place.

The fairgrounds, once devoted to entertainment and pleasure for thousands, is now the location of Lloyd Memorial High School.



References:

- Kentucky Post
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- Ky. Times Star
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