



An American Tour: *57*



Hamburg's *Buffalo Raceway*

Hamburg, New York resident James J. Dunnigan opened the doors of Buffalo Raceway in June of 1942, shortly after New York State passed a bill allowing pari-mutuel harness racing. He selected the Erie County Fairgrounds in Hamburg as the site of his venture.

The Fairgrounds had a half mile race track and grandstand in place for its Fair activities and, being only 14 miles from downtown Buffalo, provided an excellent location. Racing was very competitive and area residents welcomed a new sport to Western New York. Crowds of eight to ten thousand were often in attendance. Insufficient supply of local horsemen and horses caused many Canadian stables to arrive in Hamburg, along with stables from as far away as California. A number of world records were broken at the Raceway during its early years including the opening year effort of Dazzle Direct and driver Douglas Harvey in setting the standard for the three quarter mile distance of 1:30 ½ for aged pacers. This record was not surpassed for two decades. Sixty-three years later the Raceway remains at the Fairgrounds.

During the 1944 season, the trotter Wee Laird equaled the half mile track world record of 1:32 for the distance of three quarters of a mile. This record also stood for over two decades. Locally owned, Wee Laird remained in Western New York and became a prolific stallion. Many current horses' bloodlines can be traced to him.

Trotting mare Proximity is probably the best known of Buffalo Raceway horses during the 1940's. Proximity was a consistent free-for-all class winner and also raced at other tracks in America and Canada, frequently winning and bringing credibility to the product of the Hamburg oval.

The Raceway had 70 race programs per year during the early days and most frequently raced from mid May until August. With Batavia Downs open for mid-summer and early Fall racing, local fans had the opportunity of viewing racing for six months per year.

Continued growth of attendance and mutual handling made the 1950's a decade of success at the Raceway. Buffalo Raceway had become a harness racing fixture with the start of the 1960's and was considered one of the top ten tracks in America. In 1990, Buffalo Raceway was purchased by the Erie County Agricultural Society from Sportservice Corporation. The society has intensified the program to keep the raceway as a quality harness facility and major economic contributor to the Western New York area. Fairgrounds Gaming opened in March 2004 to rave reviews. Fairgrounds Gaming moved into a new state of the art building and became known as Hamburg Casino in August of 2010. The original tote board was retrofitted with LED digits for the 2011 season. [<http://www.buffaloraceway.com/the-races/history/>]

