

AND THEY'RE OFF!: HORSE RACING IN THE SUNSHINE STATE
JACKSONVILLE AND TAMPA IN THE EARLY 1900s

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Although horseracing flourished in antebellum North Florida and reemerged slowly after the Civil War, its third incarnation in the twentieth century rose amidst public outcry against gambling during Florida's boom times. Until the 1931 Legislature legalized pari-mutuel wagering, race tracks operated under various betting systems to circumvent the law and conduct their race meets. The state-sanctioned legalization of betting led to dependence on track-generated revenues to support burgeoning state growth and accompanying public service demands.¹

In the early twentieth century, Florida racetracks operated briefly and sporadically. In early 1909, business and professional men from Jacksonville and other Florida cities formed the Florida Live Stock and Agricultural State Fair Association with \$150,000. They built the one-mile Moncrief Race Track just north of Jacksonville at Moncrief Springs where Peter Jones earlier had built a racetrack. The Association expected the facility would make Jacksonville "the winter racing center of the South for years to come." They intended to open the track around March 15 but no later than April 1 and expected to hold the meet for a minimum of thirty days. The first meet actually ran for nineteen days from March 27 to April 17, 1909, excluding Sundays.² The 125-acre park contained long rows of stables, a grandstand, and a mile track--erected and fenced within one month of the groundbreaking. A smaller grandstand between the paddock and stables affording "an excellent view of the

racetrack" was built for the African-American patrons. The promoters planned to construct exhibition buildings near the entrance gates by the fall of 1909 for "the greatest exhibition ever held in the South."³ To reach the racetrack conveniently the Georgia Southern and Florida railroad ran a spur behind the grandstand, roads leading to the park were re-shelled, and the trolley cars ran within a short distance of the entrance. Admission to the grandstand cost gentlemen seventy-five cents and ladies fifty cents; the public field cost fifty cents.⁴

Thomas V. Cashen served as president of the Association. Originally a member of the Gentlemen's Driving Club and Seminole Club with Jere S. Smith, Cashen owned a lumber mill in Jacksonville, served as a director of the Commercial Bank, and was a member of the Board of Trade, board of public works, and city council. Socially, he belonged to the Royal Arch masonic lodge, Elks Club, and Seminole Club.⁵ Other officers included H. D. "Curly" Brown, first vice-president, J. H. Patterson, second vice-president, Jere S. Smith, third vice-president, Francis J. Pons, secretary-treasurer, and F. P. Lord, Ben S. Catlett, Leopold Furchgott, and C. C. Butler, directors.⁶ Curly Brown helped build and/or found several racetracks including Arlington Park north of Chicago, Laurel in Maryland, City Park Track in New Orleans, Clear Lodge in Montana, and Oriental Park in Havana, as well as Moncrief Park. Brown also owned Brown Shasta Ranch in California. Furchgott owned an eponymous department store in Jacksonville, and served as president of the Phoenix Club, officer in the Hebrew synagogue, and member of the Board of Governors of the Jacksonville Board of Trade.⁷ Francis J. Pons of Baker County, who made his money in turpentine, had only been in the racing business for five years as an owner.⁸ Joseph A. Murphy of New Orleans agreed to serve as the presiding judge at Jacksonville until and

unless racing resumed at Hot Springs, Arkansas. He not only served with "the highest degree of satisfaction" but accepted a contract as presiding judge for the fall meeting; in the interim he officiated at a thirty-day meet in Houston, Texas. In December 1909 he accepted a position as judge at the New York racetracks in 1910.⁹

Cashen's son, also named T. V., recalled that there were twenty-five to fifty bookmakers each with his own clerk during that first winter racing season. These bookies "posted the odds on blackboards in their stalls" at the track that attracted all of the famous horses of the day. C. Herbert Purdy, sportswriter for the *Florida Times-Union* credited much of the success of the meet to "the banishment of racing touts from the grounds and the entire elimination of all objectionable features which had the slightest suspicion of crookedness attached." The official starter, Curly Brown, had a reputation for betting on the horses and for carrying a loaded .45 in his pocket to back up his short temper. At that time horses did not begin a race from a starting gate but stood roughly in a line across the track. Many false starts occurred and it was not uncommon for thirty minutes to pass while the starter attempted to get a clean break. Brown started one field three times until one of his favorite horses broke well instead of wheeling and running back to the barn.¹⁰

On opening day the estimated 6,000 men and women racegoers ate hot dogs and hot roast beef sandwiches while they found the grandstand "tastefully decorated with American colors and miniature flags were strung from the grandstand to the entrance gate."¹¹ These novices

watched with keen interest the care and attention devoted in the preparation of the horses....The scenes were new to many of them, and they observed closely everything to the smallest and insignificant details. The officials of the club were

on hand in a good-natured humor, and obligingly answered the thousands of questions heaped upon them...¹²

A sampling of some of the inaugural races in 1909 on March 27 and 29-31 show the meet consisted of six races per day of five furlongs to 1-1/8 miles with five to fifteen horses running, with an average of nine horses per race. Some of the same horses competed in more than one race--mostly twice during the meet--but six of them ran in three races, not always with a day of rest in between.¹³ These races attracted more than local or regional horses, owners, and trainers. Trainers came from **New York** (James E. "Sunny Jim" Fitzsimmons, Homer H. Selby, J. Pierpont Morgan Mayberry, Henry McDaniel), **Kentucky** (Phil T. Chinn, Pat M. Civill, Albert Simons), **Ohio** (Mose Goldblatt), **Oklahoma** (R. D. "Dick" Williams), **Louisiana** (Jim Robertson), **Texas** (W. A. Burtschell), **Tennessee** (George Brazier, W. H. "Bill" Fizer, a principal stockholder in the Tampa race track), **Alabama** (M. C. Pritchard), **Missouri** (Frank Gardner, Lew Marion), **Indiana** (John T. Powers), **Virginia** (Wade Brown), **Oregon** (J. H. Brannon), and **Canada** (Harry Shannon). Many of these trainers traveled throughout the country racing in California, New Orleans, New York, Canada, and Florida. In addition to these well-traveled trainers, bookies such as Harry "Frisco" Gardner, former jockey turned owner Edward "Snapper" Garrison, and handicapper Frank Rathbun attended the races at Moncrief. Fitzsimmons, later to become the most successful trainer of the 1930s through 1960s, recalled that he arrived at Moncrief Park "with eight or nine horses, four children, no money, and a little bit of Irish hope that he's get some."¹⁴ At the close of the spring 1909 season, horses shipped out to Columbia, South Carolina; Houston, Texas; and Baltimore,

Maryland's Pimlico racetrack.¹⁵ Moncrief Race Track held only two more meets in the winters of 1909-10 and 1910-11.¹⁶

That first season the promoters expected their golden egg would grow and develop into one of the "largest interstate fairs and expositions in the country" exhibiting "agricultural, horticultural, live stock, industrial and educational products of various Southern states."¹⁷ Plans for this grand undertaking included reconditioning the sandy track with five hundred carloads of soil, rebuilding the grandstand to triple its size, and landscaping the lawns with flowers and tropical plants in front of and behind the grand stand and around the paddocks.¹⁸ The Association expected to attract the "high class" stables of August Belmont, James H. Keene, and William Vanderbilt when the gates opened on Thanksgiving Day 1909 for a ninety-day meet.¹⁹

The 110-day winter meeting of the Florida State Fair and Agricultural Association at Moncrief Park began on Thanksgiving Day, November 25, 1909 with between 9,000 to 10,000 people in attendance at the races. Prominent men from all parts of the state and hundred of ladies attended the first day's races. Admission prices increased to \$1.50 for men and \$1.00 for women. Joseph A. Murphy reasoned that "there was no desire to drain the local people" so "the admission price was placed at a figure sufficiently high to deter people who cannot afford the luxury of racing from going."²⁰ Horses shipped in from Pimlico (Maryland), Latonia (Cincinnati, Ohio), and Sheepshead Bay, New York. Moncrief Park had a strong New York following among horsemen and, except for the stables of James H. Keene and Samuel Hildreth and a few others, depopulated Sheepshead Bay and Gravesend racetracks. "Sunny Jim" Fitzsimmons returned with his stable of racehorses. Louis Grunthal's orchestra provided between-races music. Twenty-two book-

makers took bets, two in the "inclosure set apart for colored patrons."²¹ Returning racegoers saw a modern paddock, a new secretaries' building, and an enlarged grandstand, with private boxes across its length. The sand and clay surface prevented Moncrief from having a fast track. Purses increased to \$400, and \$1,500 for the Thanksgiving Day handicap. Although the Association expected a big field for the opening day handicap, won by "Sunny Jim" Fitzsimmons's Hill Top, only five horses ran. Promoters expected that the racetrack would be an advertisement for Jacksonville and Florida, bring thousands of dollars into the city, extend the winter season from three months to six, and increase the values of real estate. Racing judge Joseph A. Murphy wrote that the Jacksonville merchants would garner over four million dollars in trade from racetrack people and racegoers during 110 days of racing. Two local companies took advantage of the racetrack to bolster business. The J. A. Fittz Company clothiers wrote one paragraph in the *Florida Times-Union* describing the types of wearing apparel racegoers purchased at their establishment. The Stuart-Bernstein Company painted a "realistic race track scene on the background of the large east show window." Jacksonville hotel operators wanted to extend the winter tourist season, beginning on Thanksgiving instead of after January 1. They credited Moncrief Park's opening in late November as an enticement to northerners to begin their vacations earlier.²²

As the season progressed more owners and trainers shipped their horses in from northern tracks and bookmakers arrived from around the country. Word got out from Ed Cole, of the New York *Evening Telegram*, and Bert Collyer, a reporter from the Hearst newspapers who called Moncrief the "Belmont of the South," and the folks at Latonia and in New York came almost daily, with more anticipated after the Christmas holidays. With special correspondents at Moncrief, northern newspapers provided free publicity to Jacksonville as

the place to vacation. Moncrief built up its reputation so that Murphy supposed that "even if racing was resumed in New Orleans they would still come" to Jacksonville.²³

The Association hired the Pinkerton detective agency to handle security at the racetrack and protect racegoers from "the crooked ones." "Pickpockets and touts" gave Moncrief a wide berth with Captain Duhain and his assistants on the job. On December 3 the Pinkertons ejected nine touts from the grounds after identifying them to the ticket takers and refunding their money. A week later Curly Brown refused admission to two bookmakers' clerks caught in a street fight; he required decorous conduct on and off the track from all employees. Still later that month, Brown caught a jockey accepting a monetary gift for winning a race, prohibited unless through their contract employers; he fined both parties.²⁴ The number of legitimate bookmakers on the grounds fluctuated between twenty and twenty-seven from Cincinnati, Louisville, New York, Chicago, Toronto, and Tampa with new ones coming in while losers left. In December 1909, the track management ordered all bookmakers to take wagers at the odds quoted and stop posting phony prices. The Association and their West Tampa cohorts signed an exclusive contract with the Murphy Brothers to provide wire service coverage of the races to the pool rooms throughout the country.²⁵

The Association developed several ideas to attract new trainers and patrons. In December 1909 they inaugurated the first of a series of Breeder's purses to "raise the standard of horses bred in Florida." The winners became the property of the Association that would breed them. Another crowd pleaser was Ladies Day when women would be admitted free when accompanied by an escort. Each would receive a special silk or satin program for a souvenir. The Association planned at least six of these special days for the

1909-10 racing season. The first Ladies' Day on December 14, 1909 saw a turnout close to ten thousand, many who were there for the first time. Because of the expected large turnout, the Association built a large grandstand in the field "just beyond the paddock, about midway of the front stretch." Admission to this new facility would be \$1.00 for gentlemen and seventy-five cents for ladies.²⁶ The Association organized another event, the jockeys' ball, for New Year's night, by invitation only.²⁷ These special events brought out new people to the racetrack. Among the prominent first-time visitors during December were ex-Senator A. J. Alfred of Carrabelle and Congressman Charles Rogers of Brewerton, New York.²⁸

Besides pleasing their regular customers and attracting new ones, Moncrief Park wanted to maintain cordial relations with residents surrounding the track and to exude an air of wholesome entertainment enjoyable by the entire family. Concern for the track's reputation resulted in well-timed publicity about their Pinkerton security men and intolerance for the presence of "undesirable elements" on the grounds. Neighbors appreciated complimentary tickets to the races, a ploy to engender good will and dissipate any hostility. The Association figured that if the local residents, who did not normally patronize the racetrack, received free passes and could see horseracing as harmless, enjoyable, and non-threatening the track would gain allies and supporters. A local merchant's first day at the racetrack left him "more than pleased with the afternoon's sport and had no hesitation in stating that he would come back again." The track also succeeded in attracting families.²⁹

Moncrief Park racetrack closed on April 1, 1911. On April 13, 1911 the *Tampa Tribune* commented on a *Florida Times-Union* editorial denouncing horseracing not on moral grounds but financial. The Jacksonville newspaper claimed the races attracted only one class of people who lived off the residents as parasites, and did not support the local

economy. Yet in 1909 the newspaper reported "the opening of the races...was characterized by a large and fashionable crowd" and "Moncrief park is receiving the patronage of the very best people in Jacksonville. Yesterday's attendance was in the main made up of society people, and a majority of them made the long trip to the course in automobile and private equipages."¹⁹ Among the visitors attending the races in 1909 was W. F. Stovall, editor of the *Tampa Tribune* and secretary and general manager of the fair association which operated a racetrack in Tampa. The Association promoted a gentlemen's race to encourage "the healthful sport of horseback riding," especially among women, and intended to improve the breed of horses in Florida.²⁰

Shortly after the track had opened in 1909 the Church Club, a Protestant Episcopal lay group, formed an antiracing league to abolish the track because of the rampant gambling which corrupted morals, destroyed business, brought the wrong class of people to town, and hampered civic progress in Jacksonville. Historian T. Frederick Davis remarked that the races had a bad effect on the townspeople, attracted an unsavory element, and shipped profits out of town. The anti-gambling law forced the closing of Moncrief Race Track. That December a fire--possibly arson--destroyed the stables.²¹

When Moncrief Park opened in November 1909, it shared the winter season with three other racetracks--Latonia, Tampa, and Oakland (California)--and a fourth to open in Juarez, Mexico the following month. Moncrief enjoyed the distinction of being the favorite winter track of northeasterners since three quarters of the horses there had shipped in from the New York area. With New York attention focused on Jacksonville, the track needed to maintain this favored status reputation and attract more quality horses that would in turn attract others. Newspapers reported on steadily increasing attendance at Moncrief and the

disappointments at the other tracks. The *Florida Times-Union* received several letters from horsemen in Juarez stating that the meeting "was not a paying venture. The attendance is small, except on Sundays...."³⁰

The Tampa track opened the same day as Moncrief, November 25, 1909, but attracted mostly western stables from Latonia. Running simultaneously with Moncrief, the Tampa track planned a 100-day meet for its inaugural season. The Florida State Fair and Racing Association in Jacksonville and The Florida Midwinter Fair Association in Tampa jointly organized the Southern Jockey Club in the fall of 1909. The Tampa association agreed to recognize licenses issued by the New York Jockey Club, the Canadian Racing Association, the Kentucky Jockey Club, and other reputable associations until January 1, 1910 when licenses would be issued by the Southern Jockey Club to owners, trainers, jockeys, and valets. The Florida Midwinter Fair Association hired A. B. Dade as the starter and experienced horsemen Patrick Dunne as the presiding judge and Charles J. Godshaw as his associate. The management completed construction on the West Tampa track only days before opening. Twelve bookmakers handled the betting on the six races; four additional bookmakers were expected the following week. Instead, by December 4 only six bookmakers took action on the races while others on the track were "ready to cut in as soon as the playing warrants." The following day only four bookmakers did business; the day after they increased to seven.³¹ The bookmakers saw little action--racegoers seemed more intent on watching the horses than on betting. Only five horses of the 220 stabled at the track contested the Thanksgiving Day Handicap. The track competed with Moncrief Park for horses from Latonia; easier access to Jacksonville may account for turfmen's preference for Moncrief over Tampa. Attendance fell after the opening day but management expected

it to rise within the next two weeks. They cut back their operating expenses to minimize their losses and sustain the race meet for its full one hundred days. By December 6 management reduced the admission price to the bleachers from \$1.00 to fifty cents while continuing to charge the full \$1.00 price for the grandstand. By comparison, New York racetracks charged \$3.00. At this time the West Tampa track became known as the Tampa Bay Track.³² Business began to pick up the next week and management continued to anticipate post-holiday crowds. As at Moncrief Park, the Tampa Bay Track hired Pinkerton detectives to deter touts and crooks from working the crowds. Tampa also offered musical entertainment; the municipal band played between races.³³ Unlike Moncrief, Tampa did not generate reams of publicity materials for the press; the *Florida Times-Union* noted that Tampa's publicity "appears to have been sadly neglected."³⁴ Horsemen began leaving Tampa for Jacksonville as early as December 8. "All the horsemen who come from Tampa have the same story to tell--that the game down there is a losing one. It is now reported that the outside pool rooms will not take any more stuff from there" after December 23. Conversely, "the horses who have little or no chance to win" in Jacksonville "are being shipped to Tampa in hopes of winning feed money at that track. This shows the difference in the two meetings."³⁵

By December 23, the track was meeting expenses and expected to reap a profit when the post-holiday tourists arrived in town. Patrons arrived, some on the Tampa Electric Company trolley spur, to find a commodious grandstand which seated up to 1,800 people with adjacent space for 3,000- 4,000 standees. Ladies' and gentlemen's dining rooms occupied space under the grandstand.²⁶ In addition to the so-called "best people of the city,"

the Hispanic residents of Tampa attended the races. For those who could not attend in person, the cigar factory lecturers read the previous day's race results to the workers.²⁷

The winter 1909-10 racing season in Tampa which ended in March garnered mixed reviews. Racing judge Charles Godshaw called it a financial failure but a sportsman's success. While Jacksonville drew larger crowds, they also experienced several "displeasing incidents." Godshaw surmised the 1911 season would have a shorter race meeting and would attract "the racing strings of a large number of the most noted millionaire horse fanciers of the country." He hoped the stables of "James H. Keene, Belmont, Astor, Hitchcock, Payne, Whitney, Wilson, and many others" would join this year's coterie of R. F. Carman, Barney Schreiber, and Edward Corrigan. General Manager J. U. Strode anticipated several improvements at the track including building a golf course, painting the fences and buildings, and paving the sand-covered roads leading to the grounds. On March 30, 1911 arsonists destroyed the grandstand and sheds at the West Tampa racetrack, effectively closing it down.²⁸

The Florida state senate passed a bill, modeled after a Louisiana law, in 1909 prohibiting all racetrack gambling. Despite explication from Jacksonville businessman J. H. Patterson that the legislature misunderstood the ownership of the Florida Live Stock and Agricultural State Fair Association (local stockholders only) and his lobbying against changing the gambling laws, the legislature did not support the status quo. Expected to die in the House, the bill passed by an overwhelming vote of 62 to 1 and was signed by Governor Albert Waller Gilchrist to become effective May 1, 1911. Apparently many of the legislators felt pressure from their constituents to prove themselves moralistic. Gambling opponents believed that without the bookmaking feature interest in horse racing would vanish in

Florida. On the contrary, while bookmakers lost official sanctioning of their trade, racetrack operators, after a short hiatus, resumed racing. When the furor died down, the tracks tried various forms of betting until they settled on pari-mutuel wagering which Kentucky had already deemed acceptable and preferable to bookmakers.²⁹