

# HAPPY 200<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY RUSH COUNTY!

By John D. Wilson  
Rush County Historian

Happy New Year and Happy 200<sup>th</sup> Birthday to Rush County! Actually we were recognized as a county by the State of Indiana in April of 1822. But just like horses automatically age one year on January 1<sup>st</sup> each year, we are arbitrarily declaring we are 200 years old as of January 1, 2022. This is the 21<sup>st</sup> article I have written to commemorate the Rush County Bicentennial.

This year's celebration will last the entire year. During the last several months a core committee has been planning for 2022. Representatives from Rushville City, Rush County Foundation, Rush County Chamber of Commerce, Rush County Economic Development Corporation, Rush County Historical Society, Rush County Heritage, Rush County Genealogical Society, Heart of Rushville, Rushville Elks Club, the DAR and others have been involved.

Brian Sheehan is the chairman of the 2022 Bicentennial Committee. He has worked diligently to coordinate the year's activities. The big event for 2022 will be on Saturday, September 17<sup>th</sup> during Willkie Days Rush Fest. There will be a parade down Main Street and a concert at the Riverside Park Amphitheater. The act(s) for the concert are still being finalized. The parade will be in the capable hands of Sandy Fussner at the Rush County Chamber of Commerce. Call her if your group is interested in participating.

The Bicentennial Committee does not plan to "reinvent the wheel". Hopefully our annual events like the Rush County Fair (June 25 – July 2), Pioneer Engineers (August 4-7), RCHS Home Coming (September 8-10), and other activities will be held as usual. The committee encourages these events to incorporate the Bicentennial Theme into their programs. Brian Sheehan has information on things like logos and merchandising. A commemorative coffee-table pictorial book is being prepared. More information about purchasing the book will be available later this year. Also, the Bicentennial Coloring Book is still on sale at the Rushville Pharmacy and Mocha Moose.



The geographic focus of our celebration will be in the neighborhood of Riverside Park. In 1822 the Flatrock River channel made a horseshoe bend back toward today's Morgan Street. This is where the original Rushville settlement began. The Rush County Founder William Laughlin's cabin was on the north side of the river, and his grist mill was on the south side. By the 1890's a one mile harness racing track called the Riverside Driving Park was constructed south of the river about where the Riverside Park Amphitheater is located now. (The Flatrock

was straightened by the Army Corps of Engineers back in the 1930's to help with flood control. The new channel bisected the track.)

Riverside became a Rushville City Park in 2005. The Amphitheater stage building was designed to look like a giant Kennedy Covered Bridge, and it was built in 2005. Restrooms and a greenroom were added in 2010. By 2017 a pavilion was constructed near the river levee to facilitate class reunions and other special gatherings. By 2021 a new water park called The Overlook was added where Miller's Restaurant formerly had been. The summer concert series have been sponsored by Rush County businesses, civic groups, and individuals.

What follows next are excerpts from an article about Riverside Driving Park that I wrote for the Amphitheater Concert Program:

By the early 1890's there were three competition harness tracks on the edge of Rushville; north, south, and east. Every township had at least one training track, and there were reportedly a total of 25 tracks in Rush County.

In the midst of this "horse boom" was William A. Jones and his son Harrie. William and Harrie built and equipped the Riverside Driving Park. William Jones was among the pioneer horsemen in Rush County. He gained notoriety as a half-owner of Hoosier Tom, but one of his greatest horses was Florence M., a daughter of Blue Bull 75. Florence M. won 42 out of 52 races.

The Riverside Driving Park opened in grand style on July 4, 1896. They held a pony race for boys and a balloon ascension was scheduled, but the balloon caught fire and never got off the ground. The horses that raced that day were valued at over one million dollars. They came from several states and were brought in by train on special cars. Over 5,000 people paid to see the races. Race purses were from \$500 to \$600.

Riverside Driving Park was a regulation mile track 60 feet wide. Shedrow stables with 160 stalls surrounded a paddock area with a speed office and blacksmith shop. There was a grandstand at the end of the main stretch at the southeast corner of the track. A footbridge (swinging bridge) was built across Flatrock River to make access easier from the hotels and saloons.

Baseball games and circuses were also held at Riverside Park's infield. Traveling circuses came to Rushville by railroad. The Cincinnati Reds visited Riverside and defeated Rushville's baseball club 23-4. Indianapolis played here too and won 28-10.

On September 16, 1899, the races were not held at Riverside because of inclement weather. Somehow a "bogus record" of races to be held that day was signed and submitted to the American Trotting Association (ATA). After a year long investigation, the ATA issued an "edict of expulsion" against eleven horsemen and officials. Needless to say the reputation of Rush County harness racing suffered.

Then came the automobile. Dirt track automobile races were contested at Riverside's oval. During the 1920's and until WWII, 100 mile races were held. Some of the most famous local drivers were Bob Hayden, Arnie Krecht, Charles Morris, and "Wild Bill" Cummings. Three-time Indianapolis 500 winner Wilbur Shaw also raced at Riverside; driving his race car here from Shelbyville and then driving it home after the race.

Today we continue to be entertained at Riverside Park. As you sit on the grass or in your favorite deck chair listening to the music, don't forget the fascinating history of the Park. When the music stops, you may still hear the thunder of trotters headed down the stretch, "Wild Bill's" engine whining flat-out, the roar of a circus lion, the crack of a baseball bat, or the joyful sounds of children spinning on a merry-go-round.

On September 17, 2022, we hope to see you at Riverside Park! Be a part of the Bicentennial celebration. Bring your own chairs. Admission will be free!

Thanks to Brian Sheehan, Mayor Mike Pavey, and Sandy Fussner for their help with this article.

