

The “Gift Horse”

By John D. Wilson, Rush County Historian

During the holiday season we normally present gifts to those we hold dear. This past year has been a real challenge, and some of the gifts that became most important were zoom appearances, food banks, and negative covid tests. These gifts weren't wrapped in pretty paper and ribbons, but they definitely set the tone for what is really valued.

Back in the day there was a saying...“Never look a gift horse in the mouth.” What that meant was when you check a horse's mouth it gives you multiple clues about the horse's age and physical condition. So if it's a gift, don't inspect the horse too closely.

In the 1860's a Standardbred pacing stallion ended up in Rush County that gave us many gifts. His name was Blue Bull 75 (stable name “Old Sam”), and the gifts he gave us have had a lasting effect on Rush County.

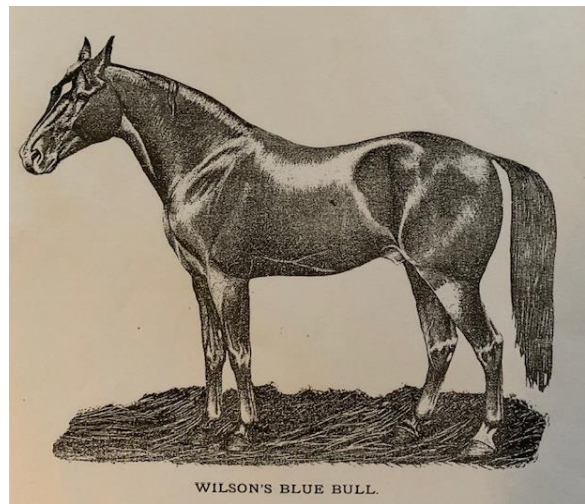
During his lifetime, Blue Bull 75 sired over 900 foals. His offspring were taught to trot by attaching toe weights to their hooves. And, they were fast on the trot pulling a two-wheeled sulky. So fast that Blue Bull rivaled Hambletonian 10 for producing sub 2:30 performers. One of his daughters named Purity won a one mile race at Gravessend (Brooklyn), New York on June 7, 1871, in 2:30. All of a sudden Rush County was on the map.

Horsemen throughout the country knew about Blue Bull 75, and they sent their mares (usually by train) to James Wilson's farm north of New Salem.

Local horsemen cashed in on Blue Bull's notoriety and brought other well-bred Standardbred horses to Rush County. At one time in the 1890's Rush County had 25 race tracks, four of them competitive tracks. So, two of Blue Bull's gifts to us were national identity and a local economic boom.

What is a Standardbred? Early Standardbred pedigrees were a mixture of Thoroughbred, Morgan, Narragansett Pacer, and common utility horses. If the pedigree was in question, the owner would sometimes just write Thoroughbred on the open line.

From the Civil War years up to 1900, there was a high value placed on fast, durable buggy horses. There were no automobiles. A horse that could pull a four-wheeled buggy one mile in under three minutes met “the standard”. Under race conditions, a two-wheeled sulky was used, and “the standard” was 2:45. As time progressed, “the standard” for Standardbreds was lowered to 2:30, then 2:15, then to today's time of 2:00 or better.



Picture courtesy of the Harness Racing Museum and Hall of Fame, Goshen, NY

Blue Bull was born in 1858 and died in 1880. But, his gift and legacy of speed on the trot lived on. During the 1880's and 1890's many of the best trainers, drivers, and farriers made Rush County their home. Equine related businesses located in Rushville, and some businesses relocated from other towns.

New factory buildings were constructed adjacent to the four railroads serving Rush County. Large Victorian homes were built with "horse money". Next time you have a chance, note the large homes that still exist on Perkins St., Main St., Morgan St., and Harrison St., and also out in the county. Different styles of architecture, including Queen Anne, Italianate, Gothic, and Neo Jacobean styles grace those streets and roads. More of Blue Bull's legacy...more of Blue Bull's gifts to us.

In 1899, a magazine was printed called The Promoter. It was a Chamber of Commerce type publication that featured Rush County's businesses, farms, homes, and significant families. Many of the businesses were equine/racing related:

William Dagler (nationally known trainer), John C. Curry (nationally known trainer), Nentzenbel and Son (carriages and horses), Hiner Livery (livery, feed, and horse sales/the old Meyer Sale Barn), Riverside Driving Park (a one mile race track where Riverside Park Amphitheater is located today), the Windsor Hotel and Grand Hotel (temporary and permanent residencies for horse trainers), Tompkin's Carriages, Ed Kelly (farrier, racing expert), Sterling Buggy Co. (relocated from Anderson/annual capacity of 2000 vehicles), Hall's Veterinary Hospital (equine veterinary specialists), Frank P. Jones Livery (Carthage), Byron D. Ball Harness and Buggies (Carthage), McKee and Thomas (equine suppliers, Milroy), and the Circleville Road Cart Co. Several businessmen in The Promoter listed their Standardbred race horses best times in their biographical writeups. Another example of Rush County's "horse boom"...another example of Blue Bull's gifts.

So where did the horse named Blue Bull 75 come from? Well, the most popular story told by horsemen and historians over the years was that Blue Bull participated in Morgan's Raid from July 8 to July 26, 1863, during the Civil War. General Morgan's men changed horses often on their raid from Corydon, across southeast Indiana, and through Ohio.

But, my research doesn't jibe with that folklore. My sources include The Horseman and Fair World, January 31, 1945, and Clark's Horse Review, January 5, 1892. From the testimony of Green Wilson, his stallion Tom Crowder had died, and he was in the market for another horse. He journeyed to Cincinnati in 1862, and he learned of a stallion owned by Dan Dorrell at Rising Sun. At one point Dan Dorrell had hidden the horse named Blue Bull to keep the Union Army from pressing him into service. Green Wilson eventually bought 50% ownership of Blue Bull from Dan Dorrell. Green Wilson owned Blue Bull outright in 1865 before selling a 50% interest to his brother James Wilson.

The Wilson brothers eventually had a legal falling out, and James Wilson gained sole possession of Blue Bull in 1866. Blue Bull stood at Wilson's Flat Rock Training and Stud Farm north of New Salem. James Wilson owned Blue Bull during most of his breeding career, and he is credited with marketing the horse throughout the country and bringing notoriety to Rush County.

A monument was erected at the James Wilson farm after Blue Bull died on July 11, 1880. The stone is now on display in the Rush County Historical Museum Carriage House, a monument to Blue Bull 75...the "Gift Horse".

Thank you to Midonna Downing and Marianne Scott for their help preparing this article and the other eight we have done this past year. In 2021 we will continue our efforts to commemorate Rush County's Bicentennial.