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— HISTORY —

The illustrious history of the Horseshoe group

In September 1902, a group of local civic leaders formed the Willimantic Horseshoe Park Agricultural Fair Association, and took over the running of the Willimantic Agricultural and Industrial Fair, which had held annual shows on the Willimantic Fairgrounds — now Recreation Park — since 1883.

The Willimantic Linen Co. had built the fairgrounds, and sponsored these fairs, but its successor the American Thread decided to cut back involvement once it had taken over the old company in 1899. The officers of the new fair association were Charles Gates (president), Dr. William Higgins (vice president and treasurer), Frank Fenton (superintendent of grounds), Danny Dunn and Ernest Chesboro (committee members), and they rented the Willimantic fairgrounds from American Thread to conduct the new fairs.

The new association was named for the horseshoe bend in the adjacent Natchaug River.

The fairs continued until 1913 when the proprietors of the

Willimantic fairgrounds, the American Thread Co., closed the park following a fixing scandal concerning professional trotting races held there.

The old fairgrounds reopened as the revamped Recreation Park two years later. Nevertheless, despite horse-switching controversies, the Horseshoe Park Agricultural fairs were considered a great success. The 1906 fair held between Sept. 18 and 20 was considered the most successful to date. The program published for the event reveals the wide variety of events held there.

The 1906 fair was sponsored by the fair association, and the Connecticut Pomological Society — a professional fruit-growing association formed in 1891. The organizers promised that this would be the best year yet for



Tom
Beardsley

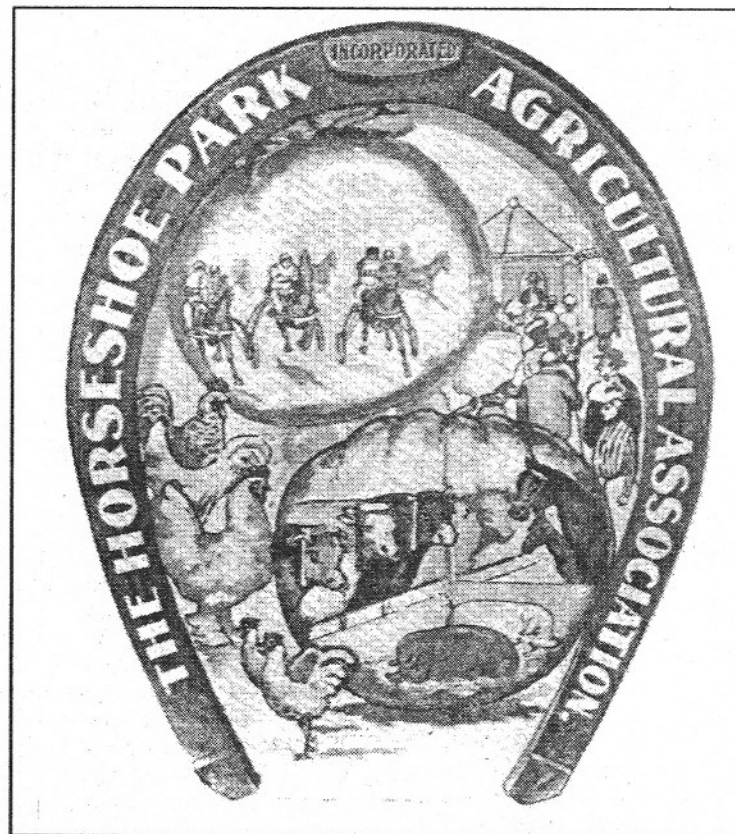
horse racing in eastern Connecticut, and that the newly remodeled exhibition building would be crowded with exhibits and works of art. Furthermore, the "highest class of vaudeville show that money can obtain" would perform in the open air in front of the grandstand, and the midway was packed with a variety of attractions.

The program commenced at 1 p.m. on Tuesday, Sept. 18 with trotting and pacing races on the track, followed by a vaudeville performance. Events commenced on day two at 10 a.m. with an exhibition of brood mares and colts, followed by an ox pulling contest and a cattle competition. That day's vaudeville performance began at noon with a high wire act performed by the Five Flying Dordons. This was a popular kind of entertainment a century ago, and the following day the patrons in the grandstand were treated to a performance by Professor Alfereno and Company, "the world's greatest high wire artist," who promised an "astounding exhibition of equilibristic ease." Nevertheless, produce exhibits were as popular as acrobats.

Members of the pomological society came to the Willimantic fair from across the state to hold their ninth annual exhibition, and exhibited Connecticut-grown apples, crabapples, pears, peach-

es, plums, grapes, quinces and cranberries. It was reported that local farmers and small holders benefited greatly from the advice given by the nearby Connecticut Agricultural College.

They exhibited sweet corn, potatoes, beans, tomatoes, cucumbers, cauliflower, cabbages, melons, pumpkins, peppers, onions, beets, carrots, celery, squash and parsnips.



The insignia of the Willimantic Horseshoe Park Agricultural Association printed in the 1906 program.