

Legends of Freeborn County

Did horse race decide county seat?

by Bev Jackson

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Albert Lea and Itasca both wanted to become the county seat. A horse race settled the issue. True or False?

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Of course its true. The whole event was printed in the Freeborn County Standard on June 16, 1886.

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I don't mean to throw any doubt on either the credibility of newspapers or on one of Freeborn County's well known historical facts. However, a local historian questions this story; and while I do not have room here to print it in its entirety, I can give you enough information for you to make a decision.

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The following poem excerpts have been taken from the The Freeborn County Seat Contest as read by Charles W. Ballard at the eighth annual reunion of the Old Settlers Association of Freeborn County on Sept. 21, 1882.

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"I get the story from old Deacon Prim,
Whose morals and sanctity both seem 'thin'
In this brighter light of better days,
When questions are settled in such different ways;
But in olden time, as you know full well.
Next to a living joke that would tell
'Gainst the opposite side, was the second best thing --
A creed stoutly upheld by good Deacon Prim.
"The Deacon said: 'The fight was long and tough;
That Albert Lea was poor and unprepared.
Itasca her competitor was rough
and Ready too, "so Deacon Prim declared.
'Itasca. too. was rich, so he avowed.
'Above the average of frontier towns.'"

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The story goes on to tell of the riches of Itasca, of the brick making machine, of implement and tools of a weekly newspaper "of Democratic flavor," cattle, horses, mules, cash on hand, furniture, and a "half-dollar mill" that could turn out counterfeits that would buy drink from here to Texas.

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It describes Albert Lea as a very poor farming town whose residents lived on catfish or suckers or strangers. The residents knew, however, that this financial distress would be remedied when the community became the county seat. At that time, the only object of pride in town was the race horse, Red Tom, owned by Sheriff Heath.

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Itasca's residents declared that much villainy and cheating went on during horse races and those wicked Albert Lea men deserved a lesson.

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"They'd (Itasca) buy Old Fly, a mare of reputation,
Whose four white feet for years had earned the fame
Of being the fastest feet in all creation...
They'd win that race in just a half mile heat,

They'd bankrupt Albert Lea and with the money
Buy votes enough to win the county seat.:"

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The challenge was issued. The date was set, the race was publicized, and everyone got involved.

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"To make a long story short, and list quite complete,
People bet all they had on that half mile heat.
People in town and out, and all over the county;
Old soldiers put the last cent of their bounty,
Boys, women, and girls, they all took a hand,
And tremendous excitement reigned over the land.

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"And now for the race; It came off as announced
And as Heath had predicted, Miss Fly got bounced.
The horses themselves did most honestly run,
And the bets on Old Tom were as honestly won.

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"'And now' said the Deacon, 'the result you may hear:
We had bets from outsiders far and near --
Our county seat rival was thoroughly busted.
Those outsiders' chattels we declined to receive;
Our noble refusal they scarce could believe,
For we even declined to accept their notes
Preferring that all should pay us in votes.
This each one agreed to without a second's delay,
And we carried the county seat on Town Meeting Day.'

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"Then that blessed old saint leaned back in his chair,
And his countenance wore its most sanctified air,
As he finished by saying that, 'without a rebate,
'Twas the most honest election ever won in this state.'"

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Have you decided? Albert Lea became the county seat because of a horse race. True or False?