

Axtell

Axtell, a brown two-year-old stallion "unknown to fame," entered the three-year-old class of trotters in 1888 to compete for a \$100 purse against a fast field on the Keokuk racecourse. His driver had assured every one that this was the first race his horse had ever entered. After losing the first heat to Senator Conkling, Axtell won the second easily in 2:41 $\frac{1}{4}$. In the third and deciding heat he flashed away with a motion that was the perfection of ease, leaving Senator Conkling, Woodford Belle, and Golden Fleece hopelessly in the rear. With no apparent effort Axtell distanced all his competitors and came home in 2:31 $\frac{1}{2}$, a feat "unparalleled" in Iowa trotting.

Axtell was foaled on March 31, 1886. His sire was William L., a son of George Wilkes, who was one of the best producing sons of Rysdyk's Hambletonian, the founder of the trotting horse family of America. His dam, Lou, was by Mambrino Boy out of Bird Mitchell. As a colt he was plain-looking, willful, and stubborn. The great flight of speed which he exhibited as a two-year-old was not at first apparent and just before the spring of 1888 Williams offered him for sale at \$300, but could find no buyer.

Axtell was not hitched to a sulky until May 26,

1888. At the time of his appearance at Keokuk he had not trotted forty times to a sulky. His gait, according to an expert, was not artificial, "taught by patient and long continued effort," but perfectly natural without the aid of weights and boots. There was "not a suggestion of waste motion about his action; neither excessive knee and hock action, nor the sprawling wide gait behind." Axtell went "just high enough fore and aft to give him good length of stride and just wide enough behind to clear his front feet nicely." He trotted "with his legs, as the saying is." His knee action was bold and "straight ahead — no paddling." Behind he had "a pendulum-like swing from the hip." But "the grand secret of his extreme speed" was in the "electric rapidity" with which he struck and recovered his stride. He seemed to take two of those flashing, eighteen-foot strides in about the same space of time that an ordinary horse took one. It was this superior rapidity which made the pacer faster than the trotter, but Axtell was as rapid as a pacer and, with the "nerve-force and energy" which he inherited through his thirty-eight and a half per cent thoroughbred blood, some observers predicted that he would trot as fast as the best pacer.

The same admirer declared Axtell one of the "best formed stallions from his nose to his hocks" he ever saw. "Not only is his head handsome when he is animated," he wrote, "but his counte-

nance is likewise the most intelligent imaginable. The surprising breadth and fullness of forehead, the pricked ears, and, above all, the peculiar inquisitive expression of the eyes and the whole face, indicate an animal of far more than average intelligence. His neck is just the mould that one likes to see on a stallion — of good length, and masculine in fullness without being the least bit gross. His chest and shoulders, too, are such as I remember having seen but one other three-year-old carry; remarkable in depth and fullness at the brisket, splendidly muscled, loosely laid and very well sloped. His middle-piece is perhaps his best point; deep through the heart, grand in its length and hooped in by well-sprung ribs, it indicates most clearly the big feeder and hardy animal that Axtell is. Over the back, loin and hips there is beauty of outline together with remarkable breadth and power. His quarters and stifles are massive and broad, strangely so for a colt of his age, and they plainly show where his propelling power comes from. His feet are just about models in form, size and texture; long at the toe without being narrow, and open and low at the heel. They are neither shelly nor spongy, but dark, close-grained and dense."

A month after his sensational performance at Keokuk, Axtell won the three-year-old trot at Des Moines, but was declared ineligible because he was only two years old. Later in 1888 he

trotted at Independence, Cedar Rapids, and Lexington, Kentucky, and had a two-year-old record of 2:23 when the season closed. The most prominent rival of Axtell, both as a two-year-old and three-year-old, was the great California filly Sunol. Horsemen were partisan in their claims as to which was the better trotter. On October 27, 1888, Sunol trotted a mile in 2:18 at San Francisco, thereby lowering Wildflower's two-year-old record of 2:21 which had stood since 1881. Friends of Axtell were momentarily squelched but waited confidently for the contest to be renewed the next year.

Early in the following spring Williams brought Axtell out for road work. A citizen of Iowa Falls who saw Axtell pull a cart on a heavy track a quarter mile in thirty-six seconds declared him to be "the greatest colt that ever lived." Early in May, Axtell trotted an exhibition half-mile in 1:13. A strong wind and heavy track on May 20th did not prevent him from turning in a half-mile in 1:09½ which elicited an outburst of applause. Fifteen hundred saw Axtell driven an exhibition mile in 2:24 in June.

On July 2, 1889, Axtell was started against Sable Wilkes' three-year-old record of 2:18 at Saint Paul. A strong wind was blowing and the atmosphere was heavy, but the colt seemed to be in fine condition. The first quarter was trotted in :33, the half in 1:06, the three-quarters in 1:40,

and the mile in 2:15½, the "most sensational colt performance of the age." Axtell had not only broken the three-year-old record of Sable Wilkes, but the four-year-old record of Manzanita that had stood unchallenged since 1886. After this performance Dunton's *Spirit of the Turf* declared: "What he can do, no man can predict with any degree of certainty; but he is the greatest colt that has been foaled thus far."

Two days later Axtell appeared at home before an Independence Day throng of at least eight thousand. Although he had just stepped off the train from Minneapolis and showed signs of fatigue he trotted a mile in 2:20½ without a skip. His best previous record on a half-mile track was 2:21¾ made at Cedar Rapids on June 22nd. Returning to Minnesota he trotted at Saint Paul in 2:15½ over a cuppy mile track that was said to be at least two seconds slow.

The influence of Axtell on Iowa trotting was apparent to all. "A year or two ago," the *Oskaloosa Herald* declared after the Saint Paul performance, "the now world-wide famous Iowa three-year-old horse Axtell, could have been bought for \$250. To-day an offer of \$65,000 made for him by Robert Bonner of New York, is refused and nothing less than \$100,000 or \$125,000 will buy him. The Iowa horse leads the world to-day for both speed and valuation. Not only that, but in a retroactive way Axtell puts an

increased value on Iowa raised speeders. We have advanced the price on Richard III already."

His next exhibition was at Cleveland on August 1st. A correspondent of the Chicago *Herald* graphically described his wonderful performance. "John Splan got up behind a chestnut thoroughbred hooked to a sulky, and Williams brought out Axtell to go against his own record of 2:15½." After scoring three times he came up on the fourth trial eight lengths ahead of the runner and Williams nodded for the word. Though the starting judge said "Go!" Williams did not hear him and was uncertain "whether to pull up or go on until he looked back and saw Splan coming with the runner. Then he began sending the colt along." At the quarter post the watches registered 33½ seconds, a 2:14 clip. On the back stretch, two lengths ahead of the pace-making running horse, he made the second quarter in :33¾. Then Splan drew a little closer, and the upper turn was traversed at the same pace. "Coming into the home stretch Splan placed the runner on the colt's wheel. From the head of the stretch to the wire the wonderful youngster trotted as straight as ever an old campaigner did, and, without waning in the slightest degree, he reached the wire in 2:14¾, reducing his record three-quarters of a second." It was a remarkably even performance and Williams told the reporter that it was the easiest mile he ever trotted

in public. He saw no reason why Axtell should not reduce his time six seconds or more to establish a new world record.

On August 23rd, Axtell appeared in the stallion stake at Washington Park in Chicago. Earl McGregor alone of the half-dozen nominated came out to compete. The first heat was won by Axtell at a jog in 2:19. At the beginning of the second heat the judges announced that the distance flag would be waived and that Axtell would be accompanied the last half mile by a running horse. After a couple scores Axtell got off in good style followed by Earl McGregor. "On sped the son of William L., as steady as a rock, and a hundred watches announced the first quarter as having been made in :33 $\frac{1}{4}$. This scarcely looked fast enough, but the great colt kept on down the back stretch and the half was reached in 1:07." At the stable turn a running horse hitched to a light wagon started off with the flying trotter. The third quarter was slightly slower than the others, but after passing the three-quarters mark, "Williams commenced to send the colt for all he was worth, the runner hard after him. Swiftly the wire is approached, the colt moving like a machine, when in a fatal moment about fifteen yards from home, the driver of the running horse lets go his head, and he rushes up on even terms with the colt. Axtell will not be headed, and he breaks, losing a quarter or half a second,

and passes under the wire. A groan went up from the stand when the gallant colt broke, but this was changed into rounds of cheers when the timers hung out 2:14."

At Minneapolis, at Cleveland, and at Chicago, Axtell had lowered the championship record for three-year-olds. Suddenly the startling news was flashed east that Sunol had trotted in 2:13 $\frac{3}{4}$ at Fresno, California. The Axtell-Sunol feud was on again in earnest.

On the afternoon of October 11th, with the temperature at 79°, the wind blowing, and footing hard, elastic, and fast, Williams drove Axtell before the Terre Haute stand, doffed his red cap to the three thousand spectators, and scored up and down the stretch. George Starr came out with the thoroughbred Father John to trail Axtell to the half and stimulate his ambition to be first to the wire by lapping him out from that point.

Axtell was scored up once, and then, turning about seventy yards inside the wire so that his colt should waste little of his strength by a long score, "Williams 'chicked' him into speed and received the word as he passed the stand. He was at his best stride as he swept around the first turn and went true as a die to the stable quarter" in 33 seconds. "On around the corner and up and down the slight hill to the half went the colt," passing the red post in 1:05 $\frac{1}{4}$. The third quarter of the track was fast, and "Axtell, with Father

John on his wheel, was past the three-quarter post in 1:37 $\frac{3}{4}$." As they raced into the last quarter, "Starr sent up old John, the runner; Williams 'chicked' to the gallant colt and he came around the turn and into the stretch without 'hang' or swerve. Half way down the straight Williams lifted Axtell and thirty yards from the wire, the point where champions feel the tightest grip of relentless time, Starr sent up Father John and Williams lifted the colt anew, and let the whip fall twice on the heaving flanks. Under the wire the pair dashed." The watches of the timers recorded 2:12, which was not only 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ seconds faster than Sunol's mark, but established a new world trotting record for stallions of any age. The crowd cheered Williams wildly as he came back to the stand with the colt to weigh in.

That evening an elegant banquet was given in honor of Axtell. Its purpose was manifestly clear — to buy the popular champion. During the dinner there was much bantering as to whether Williams would sell Axtell for \$100,000. Williams simply replied, "There are a lot of men who have \$100,000, but I am the only one that has an Axtell." Nothing was accomplished, but in the lobby at midnight John Madden and Andy Welch offered \$101,000. Colonel John W. Conley rushed up and offered \$105,000. Williams smiled, thought a minute, and accepted. A syndicate composed of Conley, W. P. Ijams, Budd Doble,

and two others became the owners of the renowned Iowa three-year-old. No higher price had ever been paid for a trotting horse.

Throughout his racing career Axtell was tremendously popular in Independence, in Iowa, and throughout the United States. Thus, a large Independence delegation accompanied him to Cedar Rapids in 1889 to see him break his record on a half-mile track. At each station Axtell's car was crowded with enthusiastic admirers who had gathered at the depot to see the noble animal. The delegation was met at Cedar Rapids by a band wagon. The ladies of the party presented Axtell with a handsome floral collar. Throughout his turf career Axtell was presented with many rich trophies, blankets, and suits.

His popularity at Independence did not wane after his sale and many deeply regretted his departure. "Pictures of Axtell meet one everywhere," declared an astonished visitor at Independence in the spring of 1890. "They have an Axtell bank, Axtell laundries, Axtell cigars, Axtell shirts and underwear, Axtell soup at the hotels, and the city council and the board of education are now considering the propriety of making the anniversary of Axtell's birth a corporation holiday."

Axtell was never trotted in exhibitions or races after he was sold to the syndicate. He was retired to the stud at a service fee of \$1000. In

less than three years the great stallion had more than earned the price of his purchase.

A distinguishing quality of Axtell was his remarkable power to pass on his great speed to his descendants. By 1900 he had 46 trotters in the 2:30 list and 5 pacers in the 2:25 list. The Axtell strain has persisted to the present through his son Axworthy (2:15 $\frac{1}{2}$). The most noted son of Axworthy is the mighty Guy Axworthy (2:08 $\frac{3}{4}$), the grandson of Axtell, and one of the greatest sires that ever lived. In 1931 this phenomenal stallion, although twenty-nine years old, ranked ninth in the list of producing sires with 15 new standard performers. Excepting Peter Volo, he is the only sire in the world to have four foals in the two minute list — Lee Axworthy, Arion Guy, Mr. McElwyn, and Guy McKinney.

Lee Axworthy (1:58 $\frac{1}{4}$) holds the world stallion record. Arion Guy (1:59 $\frac{1}{2}$) ranked third in the list of sires for 1931 with 25 new performers, bringing his total to 117. First among the sires for 1931 was Mr. McElwyn (1:59 $\frac{1}{4}$) with 30 new performers. His colts are trotting very fast and two of them hold the world record for age and sex. They are Main McElwyn who trotted in 2:02 $\frac{3}{4}$ as a two-year-old and Maid McElwyn who holds the world race record of 2:02 $\frac{1}{4}$ for two-year-old fillies. The fourth great foal of Guy Axworthy is Guy McKinney (1:59 $\frac{1}{2}$) who won the Hambletonian stake of

\$63,000 as a three-year-old. His first foals were just beginning to race in 1931, but he already had eight new performers and ranked well up among the producing sires.

Thus the stone that the builder rejected has become the cornerstone of one of the greatest families of harness horses in the world today. When Lou foaled Axtell by William L., whose sire, George Wilkes, sprang from the mighty Hambletonian, she blended the best blood of the Mambrino line with that of the fountain head of trotters. And Axtell — the only three-year-old to hold the world stallion record — through his son Axworthy has left an imperishable heritage to followers of the trotting world.

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