

State and Interstate Matches

State and interstate plowing matches, forerunners of the present National Plowing Matches, were started in Iowa in 1939. Herb Plambeck, Farm Director for Radio Station WHO and WHO-TV for the past twenty years, has been generally credited with originating both statewide and nationwide matches. A former Scott County 4-H Club leader and assistant county agent, Plambeck had been closely associated with state and national husking contests for a number of years and had helped develop Ralph Keppy and several other top husking champions. As farm editor for the Davenport *Democrat*, Plambeck helped conduct the 1935 Iowa husking meet on the Grover Hahn farm near Davenport. Later he accompanied the Iowa winner, Elmer Carlson of Audubon, to Indiana, where the Iowan won the national title. In 1937 Herb Plambeck, then WHO Farm Director, was one of three broadcasters chosen to report the ear-by-ear account of the national husking match in Missouri.

From the start Herb Plambeck was impressed with state and national husking bees as a great competitive outdoor sport. By 1938, however, while broadcasting the national meet from a trac-

tor in Missouri, he became convinced that agriculture would soon be completely mechanized and that hand husking would become a lost art. According to Plambeck:

I had the fear that this would mean the end of all the color, drama, suspense and fun the National Husking Matches meant to contestants and participants alike. I hated to see this happen so I started thinking about other events that would enable farmers to continue having something of their own, where they would be "King For a Day," and where agriculture would be in the national spotlight.

The more Herb Plambeck thought about it the more the WHO Farm Director felt that whatever activity succeeded the husking bees, it ought to have practical value to agriculture. He finally hit on a plowing match as the answer because it would focus attention on better land use. Joe Maland, manager of WHO, was willing to lend a sympathetic ear, and Plambeck promptly proposed that the winners of the Wick, Pilot Rock, and other local or county matches vie for the state title. Maland was quick to see the possibilities of such an event, and he gave it his hearty approval, along with the radio station's blessing and support. A meeting was called of officials representing the state Department of Agriculture, Iowa State College, the Grange, the Farm Bureau, and similar organizations. All attending expressed enthusiasm for a state plowing match.

Plambeck's proposal for a state plowing match was first mentioned publicly in the spring of 1939. Commercial clubs and other civic and farm groups in eight Iowa communities immediately responded with invitations. A committee inspected proposed sites and met with each of the interested groups. After all factors were considered, the Mitchellville community, where 400 farmers signed an invitation, was named as the location for the first state match.

A farm owned by Mrs. Ida Patterson and operated by F. A. Fraker was chosen for the site. The date for the event was set for September 23. Committees were named to handle parking, traffic, concessions, programs, housing, displays, and a dozen other activities. C. C. Glenn, now manager of the Iowa Agricultural Conservation and Stabilization office, was named general chairman. It was decided to call the event the Corn Belt Plowing Match.

Plans were made to have four classes of competition: an open class for men using two or three bottom plows used with tractors; a similar class where plows would be drawn by horses; a boys class; and an "old-timers" division. Station WHO offered \$500 in prize money. Top Iowa agricultural officials, headed by Secretary of Agriculture Mark Thornburg, were designated judges and officials. Information on the conduct of plowing matches went to all interested communities.

Widespread interest quickly developed throughout Iowa. Newspapers and radio stations carried announcements, as did *Wallaces' Farmer* and *Successful Farming*. In addition to the Department of Agriculture and Iowa State College, many other organizations cooperated, including the Iowa Horse and Mule Breeders, the Iowa Implement Dealers Association, the Farm Bureau, Grange, Rural Youth, 4-H and others. A "Master Plowman's Banquet" was arranged, and pretty Virginia Cross was named plowmen's queen. Five other lovely young ladies served as Virginia's court of honor.

Lack of rain had left the plowlands dry and dusty. Contest day dawned dark and threatening, but despite unfavorable weather conditions autos started arriving early from all parts of the state. All told, some 8,000 people came. A number of displays and stage programs held the visitors' attention until time for the first match featuring horses. Harry Linn, of the Horse and Mule Breeders' Association, was official starter, using a shotgun to get the contests under way.

Tremendous interest was seen in the horse division. Snow fences were placed all around the plowlands, and at times spectators were crowded four and five deep behind the barrier. Special attraction was the Pioneer Hi-Bred Corn Company's twelve-horse-hitch driven by Lyle Hinckly. The twelve beautifully matched Belgians per-

formed nicely, and furrows were turned over quickly. Eight entries in the horse classes gave the crowd a good look at what was soon to disappear from the Iowa landscape.

Tractor drivers, like horsemen, encountered rough going in hard soil, but they did a good job in demonstrating plowmanship. Judged on the basis of uniformity and straightness of furrows, trash coverage, and neat land ends, the 8,000 visitors saw new emphasis on the ancient art of plowing and witnessed genuine pride in the performance of a commonplace farm task. Eleven entries in the men's division, and four in the boys' class, kept the huge crowd on its toes.

Of special interest to many was the walking plow class, limited to men 70 or over. Winner was 79-year-old Jess Bane, a pioneer Bondurant farmer and Polk County farm leader. Second honors went to 83-year-old W. W. Pearson, using a team furnished by a grandson.

Radio broadcasts and other features, talks by Governor George Wilson and Lieutenant Governor Bourke Hickenlooper, coronation of the "Queen of the Furrow," a hitched-team contest, and a machinery demonstration highlighted the afternoon's program, which was climaxed with the announcing of the plowing contest winners.

When final scores were computed the first Corn Belt Plowing Match winner was Ray Witt, 43-year-old Mahaska County farmer. Orville

Johnson of Polk County stood second. In the state horsemen's section F. F. Martin, who had used five horses, was first, with Hinckley's twelve-horse-hitch second. The first state boys' tractor match champion was 17-year-old Lyle Mason, the Pilot Rock entrant from Meriden in Cherokee County. Twelve-year-old Lee Klett of Sigourney took second place.

About 14,000 attended the second state and interstate plowing matches held near Boone on the Harold Blansham farm in 1940. The Boone Chamber of Commerce, Boone Service and Civic Clubs, and Boone County farm groups were local sponsors and Station WHO again provided \$500 in prize money. Young Lyle Mason, the Pilot Rock entrant, won the state tractor match, defeating other entrants. F. F. Martin again won the horsemen's division. Duane Sherrill of Washta was the boys class winner, and 72-year-old C. H. Crispin of Boone won the walking plow class. A three-oxen hitch was a special attraction.

The Iowa plowing events first received nationwide attention in 1941 when *Life* magazine sent a photographer and reporter to cover the matches held on the Turner farm near Albia. Hard rains on the previous day had left plowlands slippery and muddy, but officials decided against postponement. It was well that they did. More than 20,000 persons came from several Midwestern states to watch the interstate competition in

which a Missourian, Leo Drake, nosed out Iowa's champion furrow turners. Meanwhile, Garret Rosenboom of Wright County became the new Iowa champion, with Kenneth Hill of Baxter, the junior winner, and Frank Poortinga, of Monroe, victor of the horse-drawn plow classes. A woman entrant, Mrs. William Holmstrom of Illinois, though placing low in the contest, was a major attraction — and so was her six-months-old baby, being carried by her husband while she plowed. Prize money was increased to \$750. *Life* carried a three-page spread.

Hosts and sponsors of the first three statewide plowing matches felt gratified with their original efforts back in 1939, 1940, and 1941. That they must have set a good pattern is evidenced by the fact that matches have continued in Iowa ever since, except for the war years, and a dozen other states have sponsored similar events. Moreover, the early work of Herb Plambeck and other pioneers in this field has developed into far-reaching significance, as seen in the undertaking of National Plowing Matches, first held in Iowa, and since then in seven other states. Crowds of up to 100,000 have seen the national meets, which were patterned after the first state plowing event held in Iowa in 1939, and which are now regarded as the major national farm contest of the year.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN