

The Pilot Rock Plowing Match

Best known of Iowa's many plowing events during the past half century is the Pilot Rock match held annually near Cherokee since 1908. Known as the "Mecca of Plow Matches," the Cherokee event has developed a number of state champion plowmen, some of whom have placed high in national competition.

Origin of the matches dates back to 1906 when several Cherokee County families from Will County, Illinois, suggested holding plowing contests similar to those in the Wheatland, Big Rock, and other Illinois areas. These families, living in Pilot and Rock townships in Cherokee County, got together late in 1907 to plan what they later called the "Pilot-Rock" match.

The first contests were held on the Tom Fee farm, with a number of entrants participating, and with John Bridie, using three horses on a 16-inch sulky plow, named the first of Pilot Rock's many plowing champions.

At the 1912 contest, held at the Steve Welch farm, official minutes were recorded. Included in those records is the fact that of the eight entrants, Dave Patterson was the plowing victor, and that a horse and colt show, as well as a horse driving

contest, were added attractions. Of special significance in the 1912 minutes was the fact that of the 4,000 persons present, fully half had come by automobile. An advertisement read: "The ladies of the Pilot Rock Plowing Match will serve a 35-cent dinner August 27 consisting of chicken, hot potatoes and gravy, baked beans, rolls, pickles, jelly, cookies, pie and coffee."

Multiple horse hitches and riding plows had become so common by 1913 that Pilot Rock officials decided to discontinue the walking class. In 1915 a five-horse gang plow section was added to the premium list. By 1918 tractors had entered the Northwest Iowa picture to the extent that the Cherokee County plowing leaders added some tractor plow classes. As time went on tractor classes evoked ever-increasing interest from spectators. In addition to the two-bottom tractor division, classes for three-bottom units were also added. Horse-drawn plows gradually lost favor, as horses gave way to mechanical power.

In addition to furrow turning activities there have been many other significant additions to the Pilot Rock meet. As early as 1921 the Cherokee County leaders appropriated \$100 for boys' and girls' pig and calf clubs. In the ensuing years 4-H activities have been a focal attraction.

Other additions through the years included — classes for grains, fruits, and other farm produce in 1923; inclusion of a horse-pulling contest in

1925 (continued through 1940); and the addition of a fuel economy contest, creating great interest on the part of mechanically-minded farmers.

Nor have the additions been limited to mechanical or exhibition features. Land use has also come in for prominent consideration at the Pilot Rock contests. A Cherokee *Daily Times* plowing match edition pointed out in 1955 that "the whole idea of the matches from the beginning was to encourage good farming." This was dramatically emphasized in the accomplishments of the Northwest Iowa event by the inclusion of contour and terracing matches, so that both plowmen and visitors could better acquaint themselves with latest soil and water conservation practices.

For more than forty years the Pilot Rock plowing matches were roving affairs, going from farm to farm, necessitating the use of many tents and other temporary buildings to house the exhibits and livestock. This ended in 1952 when the Plowing Match Association bought land from Karl Gesland at the south edge of Cherokee. Several permanent buildings have been erected to provide modern and comfortable facilities for 4-H, women's, and livestock exhibits. Plowing contests are held on nearby farms.

In 1955 the Pilot Rock officials were hosts to the biggest event in the organization's history. The State Soil Conservation District's Field Day and the Iowa Plowing Matches were brought to

Cherokee to enhance the Pilot Rock event. Lyle Poulsen was named chairman. Some seven thousand people turned out to see the 4-H and other exhibits and to watch the largest entry list ever seen in an Iowa plowing match. Seventy skilled Cherokee County furrow turners vied for the right to represent the Pilot Rock match in the state matches. Then, when the Cherokee winners, Lyle Mason and Kenneth Clark, were pitted against some 24 other champion plowmen from all over Iowa, they made good for the home folks. Mason won the state level land section, and Clark was Iowa's best contour plowman for the year, going on to Indiana to tie for first place in the 1955 National.

The 1955 state meet at Cherokee saw the most modern and dramatic innovation in the history of Iowa matches. Several Iowa National Guard jet planes were called upon to swoop over the fields at the designated time, signaling the plowmen to start on their way. This was in sharp contrast to the starting methods of the early Pilot Rock matches when officials merely gave an oral signal to the plowmen, so the horses would not be frightened and bolt away.

HERB PLAMBECK