

THE PALIMPSEST

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The First Decade

"It is difference of opinion," Mark Twain once said, "that makes horse races." On the day Twain was buried, a track meet, born of the belief of one man, had a stormy beginning. The meet was the Drake Relays; the man John L. Griffith.

Griffith, who had come to Drake from Morning-side College in 1908 as coach and athletic director, sensed a need for track competition between the Omaha and Chicago indoor meets and the outdoor dual season. Although the University of Pennsylvania had started relay racing in 1893, Griffith had never seen the eastern meet. But he planned for April 23, 1910, a relay carnival at Drake that would rival, in a few years, the Penn classic.

1910

The meet was begun in an era of optimism. Des Moines boosters were claiming a population of 100,000 for their city. For a 3-year program to advertise Des Moines, \$30,000 had been raised. The controversial project began with advertisements in the *Saturday Evening Post* and *World's*

Work, carrying the theme: "The City of Certain-
ties." The *Post* ad broke the morning of the first
Drake Relays.

Griffith must have wondered about "The City
of Certainties." On Thursday before the meet, the
temperature was 74°; Friday was down to 56°,
but all weather reports were for a fine Saturday.
The reports appeared in the same papers Satur-
day that chronicled "the unprecedented April bliz-
zard" that brought record low temperatures and
beached the passenger steamer *IOWA* off Racine,
Wisconsin. At Drake's Haskins Field, 82 runners,
from an original entry of 250, ran 11 relays, rush-
ing to infield tents to keep warm between races.

The runners represented four colleges: Drake,
Simpson, Des Moines, and Highland Park. Three
high schools competed: West and North of Des
Moines and Earlham. Five of the 11 races in-
volved Sunday schools, literary societies, and class
teams, one race with eight runners to the team.
The first race resulted in disqualification of two
Sunday school teams—one the winner.

The crowd consisted of 100 Drake students!
The *Des Moines Capital*, under the headline
"Drake Relay Meet Big Success," stated, "the
students stayed until the last."

Griffith early put together an excellent group
of officials. Robert Spiegel, in his fine 1959 his-
tory, *The Drake Relays, Fifty Golden Years*, tells
of one selection. When Bob Evans, an outstand-

ing Drake athlete from Bedford, Iowa, delivered laundry to the Griffith home one February night, he was named clerk, a position he held for years.

Leading performers in the first meet were Earl Linn of Drake, who himself became clerk of course for many years, Drake freshman George Foell and Plato Redfern, West High miler.

1911

By 1911, the meet took a strong step forward. The *Capital* called it, "the biggest meet ever staged in the midwest" with the largest advance ticket sale ever in Des Moines. Every seat on the west side of Haskins Stadium was sold. Alonzo Stagg of Chicago and Harry Gill of Illinois brought their teams via the Rock Island Railroad. A reception committee met trains with cars and took squads to the Washington Hotel, downtown headquarters. Missouri and Kansas were in the field, as were Iowa State, Grinnell, and Coe. Eight universities, eight colleges, and 23 high schools were represented. The crowd numbered 500.

Eight silver trophies and 16 gold medals were given. Some 250 athletes competed. Seats for children under 14 sold for 10 cents. The feature of the meet was the 440-yard anchor leg by Ira Davenport of Chicago in the mile relay, in 48.6 seconds. This gave Chicago a time of 3:24.4, fastest ever in the west. Illinois won the 880 and 2-mile relays; Missouri the 4-mile; South Dakota the 880 and 2-mile college relays.

The meet was termed a big success, "the best handled ever in the city." A timer reported the 11 events were run off in one hour, 50 minutes, 45.8 seconds.

1912

Before the 1912 Relay Meet, as the Relays was then called, Griffith sent letters to over 500 Drake alumni in the area, asking them to attend. Chicago alumni ordered two boxes at the finish line and displayed their school banner. There were 450 student seats available at 75 cents. Highland Park College took 225 seats, Des Moines 125, Ames 100. "Everything is ready for a monster relay meet," the *Des Moines Capital* of April 18 declared. "The magnitude of the meet is beginning to dawn on Des Moines citizens." Dick Grant of Minnesota was referee, Dr. Tom Burcham, the starter, and W. G. Stevenson, the announcer. Bob Evans again was clerk.

Although there was a 10-minute starting delay due to the absence of one team, the final event began at 4:40 p.m., the assigned time. On a cool, cloudy day with drizzle at the end, 12 events produced seven records. Kansas, Chicago, Wisconsin, and Minnesota each won a relay. Clark Shaughnessy, later to be a famous football coach, ran the first leg in Minnesota's victory. Coe won two college races.

It was the first time at Drake for Minnesota and Wisconsin, the latter coached by Tom Jones.

The featured performers were Ira Davenport, again, and Clement R. Wilson of Coe, who ran a 440 leg in 49.8. Six hundred athletes competed before probably 800 persons, although one sports writer called the crowd 4,000.

High schools ran a 440 shuttle relay instead of the 4-mile relay previously contested. The term "shuttle" for a race with consecutive runners going in opposite directions was coined by Drake President Hill M. Bell.

1913

In 1913, meet day was fair. Merchants bought a large block of tickets, and 100 cars with 400 athletes participated in an 11:30 a.m. parade. The crowd was 1,500 as Ames sent 300 students and the school band to see the 2½ hour program.

Tom Jones of Wisconsin refereed as Northwestern and Hamline set 4-mile relay records. Newspaper totals showed Kansas and Drake, the winner of the 880 relay, tied with eight points among universities, Coe leading the colleges, and West High with four relay wins, the high schools.

The Register and Leader of Des Moines called the meet "the classiest ever held west of the Mississippi." One of the class performers was Charles "Chuck" Hoyt of Greenfield High, who came from far back to finish third in the 880 relay.

1914

It rained heavily just before the 1914 meet, but Illinois tied the world's record of eight minutes

flat in the 2-mile relay, and Chicago set a new Drake 880 record. "Chuck" Hoyt was again far behind before he got a chance to run, but the *Des Moines Tribune* said, "the famous Hoyt starting from 8th place in the last 110 overcame everyone but Wickersham of West in the shuttle." The crowd was estimated at 2,000. Referee Alonzo Stagg said: "I see a wonderful future for this meet even though it has already become among the most important of its kind in the nation."

Civic involvement had increased. Superintendent Z. C. Thornburg of the Des Moines schools wrote teachers asking how many tickets each school would need, adding, "Tell the boys Stagg will be there." Retail merchants ordered five field boxes. Forty cots were put up in the Y.M.C.A. gym for the competitors. A 2-mile long parade with 1,000 persons, including the entire Highland Park student body, served as double promotion—for the Relays and for the opening of the Western League baseball season.

1915

In earlier meets, relay runners had started each other by touching. In 1915, batons were used, and Chicago was eliminated in the mile relay when the leadoff runner, Stegeman, lost his baton at the first turn, voiding the greatest 440 in early Relays history, a 48.2 anchor by Binga Dismond.

Fully 412 athletes from 13 universities, 15 colleges, and 24 high schools competed before 3,000

spectators in 1915. The state legislature and municipal offices were closed for the meet. The *Des Moines Capital* reported, "Some of the club women of the city have never missed a relay meet. Guests come from 1,000 miles away." Reporters from the *Chicago Tribune*, *Kansas City Star*, *Minneapolis Journal*, and *Detroit Free Press* were present. The Associated Press called the Relays one of the three most important in the country.

But the meet was expensive. The student paper, the *Delphic*, reported: "For the last four or five years, the meet has been a great expense to the athletic department. Receipts have never come anywhere near the expenses."

Some 1915 backing had come from the Ad Men's Club and the Des Moines Commercial Club. In 1916, the Greater Des Moines Committee underwrote the meet up to \$500, a figure raised to \$2,500 in 1917. Advertising in 1916 was extensive. Many Des Moines businesses put Relays ads in all packages. Street cars carried Relays banners; another banner stretched across Walnut Street. Theater film trailers showed a relay race interrupted by a cow jumping a fence and spelling out *Drake Relays*.

1916

Michigan coach Steve Farrell had said in 1915, "In a few years the carnival should draw 20,000 for it's of high caliber." The 1916 weather was ideal, the crowd 5,000, the meet, a success.

Eight states were in the field. However, the big attraction was Charley Hoyt, now of Grinnell, who broke the world 220 record, running the curve in 21.4 seconds. The straightaway 220 record was 21.2 with one holder, Howard Drew, who would later run for Drake.

Wisconsin set three relay records, one a world mark of 1:28.8 in the 880 relay with James Peterson, Thomas Casey, Carman Smith, and William Carter. Timing had a new device. Dr. Daniel W. Morehouse, later to become Drake president, developed an electric timer, and one writer said, "the day of stopwatches is over." The timer involved a circuit broken by the pistol sound. Pressure of the winner against a finish line wire caused a pen indicator on a drum to show time in .1 or .01 second.

1917

War was in the 1917 Relays picture. At the Friday night coaches' dinner, discussion concerned whether to drop sports during hostilities. Alonzo Stagg and Martin Delaney, Chicago Athletic Club physician, pleaded that sports be kept, unless they interfered with training an army.

The next day, 5,000 spectators cheered the National Anthem as a 36-foot flag hung over the center of the field. Missouri athletes had small flags sewed to their jerseys. Two Algona High runners were missing. They had enlisted.

After earlier heavy rains, the track was fast and the weather fine. Notre Dame set an American

collegiate record in the 2-mile relay, running 7:56.8. Later Notre Dame forfeited, since one runner, Andrew McDonough, was ineligible under school rules, although eligible under collegiate regulations.

For the first time there was an individual event. The 120-yard high hurdles was won by Bob Simpson of Missouri in 14.8 seconds, .2 over his own world's record. Wabash set two meet records in the college division. North won three high school events.

For the first time on record, the meet ran late by 20 minutes, probably because of the large high school field. For years there had been limited entry in the prep division, but in 1917 there were three sections in some relays.

1918

The war motif was extended in 1918. The 315th Infantry Band played. General R. N. Getty, Camp Dodge commanding officer, gave leaves to soldiers to attend. An ammunition train, motor equipped, was a stadium exhibit. Visiting athletes toured Camp Dodge. Some 103 competitors of the previous year were now in service.

Relays weather in 1918 was called by Sec Taylor, *Des Moines Register* sports editor, "the most unfavorable of all; much worse than nine years before." Driving snow covered the track, which was swept for a 100-yard dash featuring Jackson Scholz of Missouri, Howard Drew of Drake, Sol

Butler of Dubuque, and Carl Johnson of Michigan. Butler started first, but Scholz won by four feet over Johnson.

Several teams did not run in the snow. Only Chicago and Wisconsin ran the 2-mile relay. The crowd of 1,000 saw Ames win the 4-mile in 19:29.0. Illinois, Missouri, and Chicago won other relays. "When the last event was over," a *Des Moines Daily News* reporter wrote, "it was impossible to see across the oval."

1919

Weather was good in 1919, and 5,500, including 1,000 soldiers and 1,000 from East Des Moines, saw a Sioux City college win the 2-mile for the fifth straight time. Announcer Marion Morrison called the relay—"The Morningside Special." The feature event was the victory of an Adair native, Raymond Hass of Grinnell College, beating Carl Johnson and Sol Butler in the 100. Even the high school section had gone inter-state. Crawfordsville, Indiana, came 500 miles and won two prep relays. The team's coach had run for Wabash College in the 1918 meet.