

# The Cobourg horse shows

From my early years, I well recall the various activities, the exciting events that Cobourg experienced during Horse Show week. The whole town was agog, accompanied by displays of flags, bunting and street banners. The show each year attracted many visitors during the mid-August week. Hotels were crowded; private citizens entertained out-of-town relatives and visitors in their homes. Special excursion trains and lake boats catered to the hundreds of incoming folk. The show was Cobourg's big annual event. All local citizens helped to promote the spectacle in some way. It gained rapid success and became famous continent-wide.

Donegan Park provided the perfect setting. Many visitors confirmed this fact. Year after year, praise was heaped upon the officers and directors for the excellent background, the parking, and the outward view. The grounds contained a large grove of mature beech trees in the northern sector. The display oval was knoched out of this grove to the east and to the south, a beautiful spread of lawn. Grandstands were erected to the north and west sides of this ring, mostly in the shade of the large overhanging trees. To the south and to the east open fields spread

out. The blue sparkling waters of Lake Ontario, some distant woods, plus the hills of Northumberland beyond, created unsurpassed beauty. No wonder visitors raved about the setting.

In the year 1797, Stanbrough P. Stancliff was the first settler on the land. For ten years he and his growing family wrestled the forest, cleared some land, eked out a living and obtained possession from the Crown. After selling out in 1807, several owners possessed the park property down through the years. It became known as Boulton's woods. In 1878 a large Conservative picnic was staged here with Sir John A. Macdonald addressing the crowds. Sir Wilfred Laurier also addressed several thousand people in the park in September of 1911. In the year 1891, Daniel F. Donegan of California, a former Cobourg boy who had financial success in Los Angeles, bought the property and made it into a park. He was most generous in freely allowing various organizations and groups use the park including the Horse Show Organization.

The Cobourg Horse Show got its start in the summer of 1905. The Cobourg World of Friday, Aug. 18, 1905, reports: "In some respects, Monday Aug. 14 was a red-letter day in the history of the town for it was the occasion of

Cobourg's inaugural summer horse show, an event that will probably prove to be an annual celebration. The idea was first broached by some of our prominent American visitors who soon secured the co-operation of local citizens and tourist guest, and the result was an eminently successful and unique event..."

In this way, starting small, the annual event was launched. It expanded and quickly became continent-wide famous, attracting many visitors from far and near.

Three days were required to stage the show in 1906. With mid-August perfect weather, attendance was good. Exhibitions of high jumping was a feature and the Cobourg Citizens Band provided entertainment. A new grandstand came into use. For the next seven years, under direction of strong and enthusiastic committees, the Cobourg Horse Show expanded and grew in attendance, the number of classes and valuable prizes offered. By 1907 it was rated the best event of its kind in all of Canada. Special trains, excursions by rail and boat brought crowds to Cobourg. By 1908, the show required four days and in 1912 it occupied five days. In addition to the Cobourg band, the Rochester band and the 48th Highlanders Band of Toronto attended from time to time. A new

horse barn, accomodating 65 horses was erected in 1909. The show encouraged better horse breeding in the district. Each year surpassed the former one in crowds, classes, entertainment and improvements to the park. One day saw 7,000 people in attendance.

The year 1912 stands out. The horse, CONFIDENCE, a bay gelding, owned by the Hon. Clifford Sifton, established a world record for the high jump of 7 feet 10 and 5/8 inches, which has never been eclipsed since that time. The previous record was 7 feet 10 and 1/4 inches. Each year the musical ride by the dragoons, the 48th Highlanders Band and other interesting attractions created much interest and enjoyment.

The show was opened in 1913 by the Co. the Hon. Sam Hughes, Minister of Militia. That year experienced the maximum of crowds. Rain marred the 1914 show. By that time war had come, but in spite of these adverse conditions the show was a big success. The next show was held in the year 1919.

On Tuesday Aug. 19th, 1919, the Cobourg Horse show was reopened. The hard working committees lined up five days of program, with several new attractions. W.W.I. had brought about many changes to the pattern of living of pre-war days. The popu-

lace had a much different outlook. Many new inventions had come into use. Old dobbin was being replaced by the automobile and mechanized equipment on the farms.

The evening of Aug. 19th, 1919, deserves special mention. The war veterans were banqueted by the Cobourg Town Council in the armory, followed by the grand march to Donegan Park. Taking part were the 48th Highlanders Band, the Alderville Band, the Port Hope Band and the Cobourg Citizens Band, plus the Royal Canadian Dragoons. That evening a military tatoo was presented to the huge crowd that filled the grandstands. It was an event the writer ever remembers. The music was led by the massed bands. What a show!

The Horse Show continued year after year and the 17th showing in August of 1925 was the last one. New features included a daily steeple chase, polo games, high jumping on Saturdays and a big list of entries each year. Fireworks were featured Friday nights. Time changes things and the show was terminated after August, 1925.

"Our little systems have their day; they have their day and cease to be."

PERCY CLIMO IS A  
COLBORNE HISTORIAN

Saturday Morning Post, Aug. 19, 1989