

## Grand, annual, and elegantly equine

The Boston Globe

By John Powers, Globe Staff | July 18, 2010

SARATOGA SPRINGS — As a rule I don't turn up at the racetrack in a seersucker jacket and tie, but I do here. One never knows when the Whitneys might proffer an invitation to their private box so it's wise to be appropriately turned out, just as it was in the 19th century when this spa town was the playground for polite society. Horse racing may be disappearing from the American landscape, yet Saratoga's gracious and leisurely allure endures in a time warp of the most pleasant sort.

"From New York City you drive north for about 175 miles, turn left on Union Avenue and go back 100 years," sports columnist Red Smith wrote decades ago, and that hasn't changed. The Victorian-era "cottages" still line the streets and Broadway still bustles as it did in the 1870s when the United States and Grand Union hotels welcomed thousands of wealthy visitors in search of diversion.

People come here for the waters. They come for Skidmore College, for the Tanglewood-style concerts and dance at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center, for the museums. But in August they come for the ponies at what long ago was labeled "the dowager queen of the American turf," the oldest sporting venue in the country.

Saratoga, which opened a month after the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863, begins its 142d racing meet Friday and runs until Sept. 6, the track's longest stretch since 1882. As always "The Spa" will attract the top horses and trainers for its big stakes races: the Whitney, the Alabama, the Woodward, and the million-dollar Travers, the country's oldest major thoroughbred race, first held in 1864.

This year the Travers, on Aug. 28, is expected to attract all of the Triple Crown race winners: Super Saver (Kentucky Derby), Lookin At Lucky (Preakness), and Drosselmeyer (Belmont). Last summer the Woodward was the highlight race because it featured filly Rachel Alexandra taking on — and beating — the older boys in a historic chase that went to the wire.

Yet most of Saratoga's habitués come for the track's throwback charm. It's a lawn party, with gentlemen and ladies strolling the grounds in their summer finery. But it's also a country fair, with families bringing umbrellas and coolers for picnics on the backyard lawns beneath the elm trees. Everything about the place is romantically retro — the old wooden grandstand, the lake in the middle of the track, the striped awnings, the greeters in straw hats and red vests, the carousel, the gazebo, the Big Red Spring spouting mineral water, the hand-rung bell sounding 17 minutes before post time.

While the first race most days isn't until 1 p.m., people still turn up at 7 a.m. for a buffet breakfast, a glimpse at the horses working out, and a free tour of the stables. The breakfast tradition goes back to the 1870s, when the toffs and their ladies would drop by for champagne and frogs' legs after a night of genteel carousing and gambling at the casino.

For hundreds of years the Iroquois came for the healing waters at The Medicine Spring of the Great Spirit. George Washington, who slept here in 1783 after imbibing at the High Rock Spring, considered building a home in the vicinity. The upper classes began coming a few decades later, first by steamboat and stagecoach, later by train.

Gideon Putnam, generally regarded as Saratoga Springs' founding father, arrived in 1789, built the first hotel, and designed part of the street grid. After the Civil War, Putnam's effervescent old village was overrun by what author George Waller called "a teeming melange of profiteers newly enriched by a carpet-bag tour of the South, Eastern financial titans, Western bonanza kings, transportation tycoons, statesmen and politicians, society dilettantes, sports members of the burgeoning turf aristocracy, and a swarm of lesser mortals who came to mingle with the mighty and emulate their antics within the limits imposed by their considerably less bountiful capital."

Winslow Homer drew them for Harper's Weekly and Currier and Ives penned their portraits. Mark Twain came by as did Oscar Wilde and Henry James, who hated the architecture, with all its turrets and towers. Diamond Jim Brady

squied Lillian Russell, the most-ogled woman in town until the leggier Rachel Alexandra pranced in. Victor Herbert conducted concerts twice a day and John Philip Sousa played marches.

The gamblers turned up, too, most notably “Bet-a-Million” Gates, lured by the casino, by private card games, and sporting events ranging from the Harvard-Yale boat race to track meets to boxing matches. The New York World, which dispatched Nelly Bly for a look in 1894, headlined “The Shameful Story of Vice and Crime, Dissipation and Profligacy at This Once Most Respectable Watering-Place.”

You could take a bath at the Spa in more ways than one, especially if you bet favorites, which high-rollers Arnold Rothstein and Nick the Greek did not. Then as now, Saratoga was famed as a “Graveyard of Champions.” Man o’ War suffered his only loss here (it didn’t help that he was pointed the wrong way at the start). Gallant Fox was beaten by Jim Dandy, a 100-to-1 shot. And Secretariat, who had won the Triple Crown in a breeze, was upset by Onion.

Sooner or later every name horse seems to take the line at Saratoga: War Admiral, Seabiscuit, Whirlaway, Native Dancer, Kelso, Buckpasser, Jaipur, Damascus, Forego, Affirmed, Cigar, Curlin. Rachel Alexandra’s appearance was heralded by “Run Like a Girl” banners throughout downtown and the roar of the crowd when she stepped onto the track startled her so much that jockey Calvin Borel had to jump off.

Yet what makes Saratoga special, more than its pedigree, is its intimacy and accessibility. Early risers can claim a picnic table by plunking down their belongings, walk across the street to take in morning workouts with the railbirds at the Oklahoma track, wander around the stables where top trainers like Bob Baffert, D. Wayne Lukas, Nick Zito, and Steve Asmussen hang out, then head back for breakfast.

You can soak up Saratoga’s essence without ever entering the grandstand, and thousands do. There are betting windows in the backyard along with TV screens showing the races. And since the pathway from the paddock to the track crosses the lawn, spectators easily can check out the thoroughbreds before putting their money down.

Though the dress code is seasonably casual, suits and jackets (ties requested) and dresses and pantsuits are required for the box seats where the Whitneys and Vanderbilts and Phippses long ago set the sartorial tone. If it’s August, the horsey set still can be found in Saratoga, where summer officially ends on Labor Day. That just happens to be the last time that a gentleman fashionably can wear seersucker.

*John Powers can be reached at [jpowers@globe.com](mailto:jpowers@globe.com). ■*