

Horton's

Michigan Notebook

Political & Social Commentary

February 10, 2019

Richard Rudnicki honored by Michigan Harness Horsemen

By Steve Horton

When Richard ‘Dick’ Rudnicki’s father, Andrew, joined a three-way partnership to buy a pair of race horses in 1939, who could have foretold that it would not only become an important part of his dad’s remaining life, but would result in Dick being honored 80 years later by the Michigan Harness Horsemen Association with a Life Time Achievement Award for his many contributions to the industry.

“The horses were ‘Genni Direct’ and ‘Dortha McKay’,” Rudnicki noted. “My dad’s partners were Walt Tomion, the proprietor of Tomion’s Dairy in Downtown Fowlerville, and J.B. Munsell, a local attorney.”

Andrew was the co-owner of ‘The Fowlerville Review’ along with Gordon Harmon, a business that published the weekly newspaper and offered printing services.

Fowlerville, with the fairgrounds just west of town that offered barns and a race track—ideal for boarding and training a horse—saw a number of area residents, including several local businessmen, who owned and trained harness race horses.



Richard Rudnicki received a Life Time Achievement Award at the annual meeting of the Michigan Harness Horsemen’s Association on Jan. 26.

The partnership, Rudnicki added, did not last long. “My dad wanted to be more

involved with taking care of the horses and training them, while the other two didn't want to be that involved, so they kept 'Dortha McKay' and Dad had 'Genni Direct'."

Dick, who was born in 1931 in Howell, the eldest of Andrew and Lena Rudnicki's six children, was three years old when his father and Gordon purchased 'The Review', with both families moving to the community.

"They had both been printers at the 'Livingston County Press'," he pointed out. "It was during the Great Depression, so leaving a job to take over a business posed a risk."

One of the perks for Dick, while he was growing up, was plenty of after-school work helping at either the newspaper-print office or assisting with the race horses.

"I was nine when I started jogging 'Genni Direct'," he recalled.

Other duties included cleaning stalls and accompanying his father to races. "The first parimutuel race we went to was in 1940 at Davison," Dick said. "My father, along with training the horse, also became a driver."

Competing in the races at the annual Fowlerville Fair was a given, but Rudnicki remembers competing at the fair in Lake Odessa and riding in the back of the truck that hauled the horse trailer."

Over the next several years, up until a couple of years before his death in 1954, Andrew had other horses that he owned and trained.

Dick, along with keeping busy with his after-school and summer work, attended Fowlerville Schools, graduating in 1949.

"Our class will be observing our 70th reunion this June at the Fowlerville High School Alumni Banquet," he pointed out.

Soon after getting his diploma, Dick joined the U.S. Navy and was eventually assigned to the USS Valley Forge, an aircraft carrier.

"I was discharged after one year and put on inactive duty," he noted. "But, with the start

of the Korean War, I got a notice in late 1951 that I was being recalled and would need to report for duty the next year."

One problem, though, was that he was engaged to future wife, Kate, and the couple was planning a June wedding in 1952. "I asked her if she wanted to wait until after I got out or before I want back in," he said. "She said 'before', so we moved up the date and were married on February 2nd—Ground Hog Day. We just recently observed our 67th anniversary."

During his second tour of duty, which lasted until the following year, he was assigned to the USS Curtis, a seaplane tender that had been converted to a research ship for the nuclear testing going on at the Bikini Atoll in the South Pacific and finally the USS Shenandoah, a destroyer tender.

He was discharged with the rank of Petty Officer 3rd Class.

Back stateside, he rejoined his father at 'The Review'. By then, Andrew was the sole owner—his partner Gordon Harmon having sold his interest in 1946 to go fulltime into the real estate and insurance business.

With his father's death the following year, Dick became a co-owner with his mother, Lena. He also eventually resumed his involvement in harness racing.

"Clate Fenton talked me into becoming an announcer at the fair," he recalled. "I did that and later announced at other fairs. I also became the Speed Superintendent where I would arrange the race, line up the judges, and handle the entries."

In addition, starting in the late 1950s and for the next few years, he owned a couple of horses and eventually partnered with Paul Champion. "He had owned the 'Brighton Argus' with another gentleman and, after they sold the paper, he came to work for me as a printer," Rudnicki said. "He also worked as a trainer."

A larger involvement occurred in 1962 when fellow Fowlervillian, Frank Utter, who worked as a judge at the tracks, asked Dick if he'd like to be a patrol judge at Jackson Raceway during its race meet.

"Frank told me there was an opening and wondered if I was interested," he said. "I accepted the job which paid \$10 a night and sat in a shack on the third turn. My job was to observe this part of the track and make sure no violations occurred."

Not wishing to have any conflict-of-interest, Ruknicki soon after sold his interest in the stable to Champion who, he noted, went on to make harness racing a fulltime career.

Over time, Dick moved up the ladder. He became a paddock judge where he handled entries and got the drivers and their horses onto the track and then was promoted to being a presiding judge. In that latter position, he was in charge of the nightly meet from the time the horses entered until the final race was over.

During his career, he worked at the tracks at Hazel Park, Northville, and Sports Creek, along with Jackson. He also helped at various fairs during the summer, including announcing the races at Fowlerville.

Early in 1972, his career as a newspaper publisher and printer ended when 'The Review' was sold to the 'Livingston County Press', leaving him with only his job as a race judge.

That set the stage for a new phase in his life, namely as the Livingston County Drain Commissioner.

"I ran for the office on a dare," he said. "I was playing golf with a foursome that included Judge Bert Hensick. He asked me what I was going to do now that I'd sold the paper. I replied that 'I didn't know, but I have to do something since I've worked two jobs for years and would go stir crazy. He told me the Register of Deeds wasn't going to run for re-election, and I should run for the office. I

said that I didn't think I could do that. Then he said, 'You probably wouldn't win anyway.'"

Having been dared, Rudnicki went to see the Register of Deeds, a person he'd done printing for and a friend. "He wasn't running, but his wife, who was the Deputy Register, was going to," Rudnicki noted. "Their being friends, I wasn't going to file for the office."

However, being in the courthouse, he stopped to see the county clerk, Joe Ellis, who was also a friend and someone he'd also done printing for. "I told Joe about my visit with the Register of Deeds and what happened. He said that the (incumbent) Drain Commissioner wasn't going to run again and that I should run for that opening. I hesitated, but then he said 'here' and handed the papers to file."

Dick was elected to the office that November and re-elected every four years until 1996. He added that the position only paid \$7,500 a year, not nearly enough to raise a family on, so he kept his job at the track and was back working two jobs.

Later on, he became the head of the County Dept. of Public Works, with the main duty being to oversee the county's landfill. "With the added job of DPW Supervisor, my pay was raised to \$11,000 a year.

Dick said he had planned to retire once he turned 65, so in 1996 he ended his tenure as the Drain Commissioner and his career as a race judge.

But, while he was no longer a judge, he still continued to help at the race meets "where and when needed" over the next few years and still announced fair races.

Dick and Kate moved to Zephyrhills, Florida a few years ago, but returns to Fowlerville during the summer for a visit.

He made an extra visit to Michigan this past January to attend the annual meeting of the Michigan Harness Horsemen's Association, held in Howell on Jan. 26, where he received his prestigious award.

The Rudnicki's have four children—Pamela, Andrea, Bradley, and Stacia, along with nine grandchildren, 16 great grandchildren, and a great great grandchild.