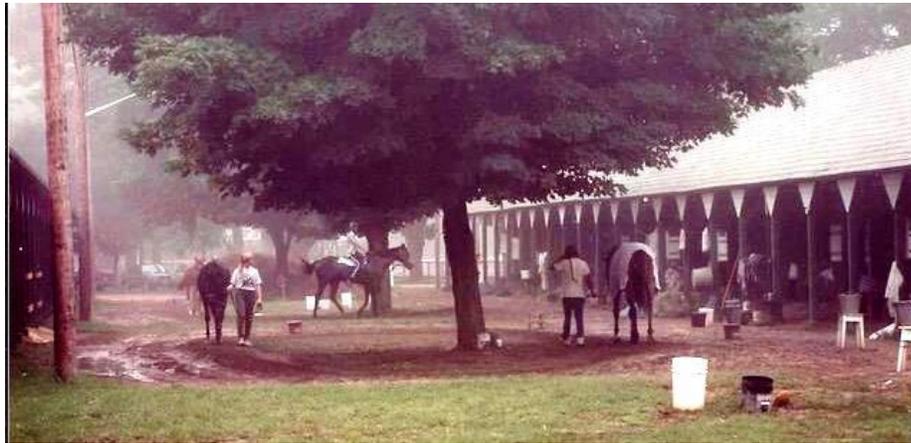


# This Week in Saratoga County History

## The Backstory of the Backstretch

Submitted by Mike Murray August 26, 2021

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*Saratoga Backstretch – Photo by Fred Brenner*

The saga of Saratoga Thoroughbred Racing has largely been told by and about the horse owners, tycoons, the rich and famous of their era. The people who actually care for the horses, the backstretch (barn area) workers, grooms and hot walkers often receive little attention.

Facilities to house the backstretch workers were nonexistent in the early years at Saratoga. They slept in the hay loft, stalls, or tack rooms. Sanitary facilities for them were equally rare. The race meeting at Saratoga was one of relatively short duration – 4 weeks. The horse had better accommodations' than those looking after its welfare.

A syndicate comprised of some of the wealthiest and influential men in America purchased Saratoga Race Course at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The syndicate, put together by William C. Whitney, soon became The Saratoga Association for the Improvement of the Breed. Many improvements to the public facilities at Saratoga followed the creation of the Saratoga Association.

The racing elite, the tycoons of the early 1900s built their own barns on the Saratoga grounds. The Duponts, Vanderbilts, Sanfords, Clarks, Belmonts, Whitneys all had barns, in some cases barn areas built at Saratoga. They also had “cottages” built for their trainers and built bathroom facilities for the barn workers. Large squad tents were put up throughout the barn area to shelter the barn workers. These tents were used into the late 1950s. Spartan concrete block dormitories with bathrooms including showers with hot water were constructed to house the backstretch workers, beginning in 1956 after the New York Racing Association was formed. The dormitories have been completely overhauled in the last 5 years.

During the roaring 20s of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century The Young Men’s Christian Association thrived in Saratoga Springs. The YMCA was housed in a multi-story brick building on Broadway. Basketball courts, volleyball, a swimming pool, all types of activities were available in the Broadway YMCA. The local YMCA was so successful that in the late 1920s a satellite YMCA was built on Saratoga Race Course grounds. The building was built in a U shape. The entrance to the building was at the center of the bottom of the U. Admission was 25 cents in the late 50s, with a towel provided with each paid admission. There was a kitchen in the entrance space. Each wing was equipped with pool tables and ping pong tables. Behind the kitchen were 2 changing rooms with toilets and showers.

Outside, behind the changing rooms were 2 swimming pools. The pools were separated by a wall. Segregation, separate but equal, was in force even in Saratoga Springs. The wall separating the pools was gone by the late 1960s. This YMCA building came to be called the Jockey Y. The Jockey Y held softball games and tournaments. An elevated, roofed boxing ring held multiple boxing matches each week during the race meet.

The Great Depression saw the Saratoga Springs YMCA cease to exist. The YMCA building at the race course became the property of the Saratoga Association. In the 1990s the swimming pools were removed and the east wing of the structure was converted to a women’s dormitory. Old timers still call the building the Jockey Y, the modern world refers to the building as the Rec Center.

Through a vast expanse of the history of racing and Saratoga Race Course a large portion of the backstretch work force were African American. Today, the backstretch work force is predominately Latino. There are many reasons for that turn around in the workforce. During the 1980s the face and the language on the backstretch changed seemingly overnight. Jobs on the backstretch never paid well with minimum wage and benefits arriving fairly recently. The work sometimes seems constant.

The change in the make up of the workforce brought other issues with some issues having major impact. The language difference is perhaps the simplest to solve. Legal immigration is difficult, a Green Card, even a Seasonal 7-month Visa is becoming harder to obtain. And these are increasingly expensive. In almost all cases the expense is beyond a groom’s ability to meet, the trainer who employs him will, often, cover the expense.

Racetrack life has changed and is constantly changing. Many organizations and individuals are working to improve the living conditions of the backstretch workers. The Race Track Chaplaincy, and B.E.S.T. work very hard to improve the living conditions in the barn area. This year an outdoor pavilion and a preschool childcare facility have been opened for the barn area workforce, through the efforts of thoroughbred race horse owners Marylou Whitney and Michael Dubb. The outdoor pavilion was the brainchild of the late Marylou Whitney. The pavilion was opened with an ice cream social and will be used to host dinners for the backstretch workforce. The childcare center, Faith's House, is the result of the efforts of Michael Dubb. Faith's House will now mirror the services to the children of backstretch employees at Saratoga that Anna's House at Belmont Park provides. These changes have improved the living conditions of track workers and their families, who are important contributors to the success of the Saratoga season each summer.