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New York in the Early Days

By Robert D. Fierro

Beginning in 1866 and lasting for almost 20 years August Belmont kept a stallion station and nursery in the town of Babylon on the south shore of Long Island. His first major purchase was a yearling colt foaled on Staten Island in 1867 named Glenelg who was extremely large and did not race at two but was the best 3-year-old of his generation by virtue of winning the Travers. Belmont sold Glenelg to James Swigert of the bluegrass because he stood the colt's sire, Kentucky on Long Island; Glenelg went on to be a major stallion and after 20 years, Belmont moved his operation the bluegrass state but not before his filly Woodbine won the inaugural Alabama Stakes at Saratoga.

Belmont's endeavors were only a part of the New York Thoroughbred legacy. James Morris, who maintained a sizeable operation in Westchester County north of New York City bred Ruthless there, and she won the inaugural Belmont Stakes, a feat that solidified her standing as the best of both sexes that year. Belmont got some satisfaction in the race named for him when his homebred Fenian won the race two years later in a mighty duel with his stablemate Glenelg.

Other breeders contributed mightily to the development of the industry until quite suddenly in 1909 the legislature banned horse racing in the state in what was just one example of how those who pushed temperance can do great harm to the majority. Before the law was repealed three years later most of New York's breeding industry had relocated to other states and that seemed the end of it.

Still, many pursued glory by producing future runners on the Empire State's vast, rich in limestone, and diversified land. James Butler produced 14 stakes winners from his Eastview Stud in Westchester, from where his stallion Sting sired Questionnaire, a New York-Bred whose sire line went from his son Free For All to that one's son Rough 'n Tumble to his son Dr. Fager.

Willis Kilmer operated Sun Briar Court in Binghamton, in the southwest of the state. Kilmer bred that colt at his farm out of the mare Sweet Briar II whom he'd purchased carrying him with her foal Sunreigh at her side. The latter eventually sired Reigh Count, who won the 1928 Kentucky Derby and sired Count Fleet, who won the Triple Crown in 1948.

Numerous other breeders kept up the game but there was no integrated industry such as had developed in Kentucky with most of the good horses having been produced by well-to-do businesspersons at their country estates.

Ironically, it was in 1969, sixty years after the dreaded laws that suspended the sport, that quite by surprise one older horse ending his career and one two-year-old colt beginning his career captured the imagination of racing fans and stirred the hopes of breeders in the state.

The older horse was Mr. Right, a gelding whose original ownership included premiere band leader Peter Duchin and then for a partnership which included Frank Sinatra the following year. In 1968 he became the first horse to win both the Santa Anita Handicap and the Woodward Stakes—defeating the mighty Damascus in the latter. In 1969 he closed out his career with a sparkling win in the Suburban, winning 17 of his races on dirt and turf and well over \$650,000.

Mr. Right was foaled at Tanrackin Farm in Westchester County, just up the road a bit from Tilly Foster Farms where in 1967 a chestnut colt by Prince John was foaled and eventually sold as a yearling to David A. (Sonny) Werblin, an impresario and promoter who was then part owner of the New York Jets and is forever known as the man who signed Joe Namath to quarterback his team—who rocked the sports world by winning the Super Bowl that year. Named Silent Screen, the colt was hands-down the champion two-year-old of 1969 and went on to become a very successful sire in Kentucky.

As prideful as these accomplishments were for New Yorkers, the appellation "Registered New York-bred" was hardly on anyone's lips until 1981 when an obscurely bred and very large grey colt named Fio Rito, who was a fixture at Finger Lakes Racetrack in the Genesee Valley where he was foaled and raised, shocked the racing world by running off from the field in the Grade I Whitney Handicap at Saratoga at a very generous 10-to-1. In many respects, as detailed elsewhere in this series, 1981 was when it all started to come together for the New York breeding industry.