

THE RAGENS: BORN INTO RACING



Ed Ragen and Super Twenty.

by **Bob Gates**

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The Ragens were a multi-generational horse racing family with its roots in Ireland. Edward Michael Ragen was one of the original grand old men of racing.

“Eddie” spent more than 70 years racing thoroughbreds, until an injury from a 1981 fall forced him into retirement at the age of 91. One of his many contributions to the sport was mentoring his nephew, John Edward Ragen who in turn would spend the better part of 60 years in the same sport. And that’s what you could call a lot of “corporate” memory.



Early win at Polo Park for Ed Ragen.

Ed Ragen was born August 3, 1889 and lived most of his life in Townsend, Montana. The family is proud of their Irish heritage and as far back as anyone can remember the Ragens always had horses in their life.

*May the road rise up to meet you,
May the wind always be at your back,
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
And the rain fall soft upon your fields,
And until we meet again,
May God hold you in the palm of His hand.*

-- Traditional Irish Blessing

Ed Ragen raced his stable throughout the northwestern United States and in western Canada. He first came to Winnipeg to race at Robert James Speers' Whittier and Polo Park racetracks in 1937. He missed the first year Assiniboia Downs opened but arrived early in 1959 and raced here until 1975. He spent the twilight of his career (1976-1981) racing in Saskatchewan.

He was your typical old-school horseman:

“In my opinion, I think a man gets the best out of life when he owns a horse. Sure they eat hay and oats and can't speak, but they're mighty human after all and you just have to get to know them.

I have lived my life with horses and never regret a minute of it. Sure, I'd like to have more wins, what owner wouldn't? You always know when your horse is trying, and if he gets beat, well that's racing.”



Ed on Red.

Horses stabled in Ed's barn during his time at the Downs included: Super Twenty, Miss Reliable, Kottonwood Kid, Go Spy, Colonel Miltie, Pete'N Repete and Pairs and Spares. Remember any of these?

On August 31, 1962, Ed Ragen's Miss Reliable (13-1) combined with Kickapoo Joy (69-1) for a then record (and now defunct) Quinella of \$499.60. One of the horses these two had to pass in the race was Maida, a 127-1 longshot who was leading at the top of the stretch but faded to fourth.

Ed never married. The love of his life was racing horses. His stable colours were blue and white. His riders wore white trousers, a blue silk shirt and a blue sild cap.

When you consider his 94-year life, with its happiness, sorrow, pleasure, heartbreak, joy, and thrill of racing horses, is it possible to pick his proudest moment? Probably not, but June 15, 1975 has to be up there.

To mark the official opening of Assiniboia Downs under its new ownership headed by President, Jim Wright, Edward Ragen was one of seven men honoured for their contributions to the sport of horse racing. The others included Dick Armstrong, Maurice Smith, Jim Coleman, Lee Williams, Tom Sumner, and Lou Davies. Now that's a collection of racing dignitaries!

Who knew: Ed was part of a racing oddity in July 1961, a true Montana Daily Double. Gary Danelson's Montana Policy won the first race and Ed's Steve O'Gaunt won the second race. In both races there was a dead heat for second place and the dead heats involved horses #3 and #8.

Ed's nephew, John E. Ragen was born December 11, 1927, and as a young lad travelled with his uncle "learning the ropes." John worked as a hot walker, groom, pony boy and galloper. He would eventually find his calling as a racing official. John was respected in all of the many posts he held and was known for his fairness.

In December 1952 John married Sharley Williams and raised a family. Daughter Patti and son Dan made their way with Mom and Dad, travelling to racetracks from Spokane to Saskatoon, Regina, and Winnipeg.

At the Downs John held various positions including Outrider, Horse Identifier, Clerk of Scales and Assistant Racing Secretary. The last duties he performed at the Downs were in the mid 1970s, but he carried on in the business in Washington and Montana. All told, he worked in Canada for more than 30 years.

There's no better time to highlight the most significant difference in Eddie's and John's lives. Uncle Ed never married. John had a wife and two kids and that made things complicated. Together, John and his partner-for-life, Sharley, made a commitment to the racetrack lifestyle.

Those in the horse business will tell you that spouses who live that life don't always get the credit they deserve. Mrs. Ragen never complained, but the difficulties and sacrifices of raising a family "on the road" couldn't have been easy. By the way, Patti tells us that her Mom will be 91 years young this July 21st and still lives in her own home!

John passed October 10, 2005, and he'd be annoyed if we didn't spend time talking about his horse JB. JB was always known as just plain old JB. Dan explained that was his name when his Dad first got him.



1965 Manitoba Derby. Vic Clare on Whitey and John Ragen (right) on JB, stand tall at St. Charles Golf and Country Club. According to Dan, who is a graded stakes-winning trainer now retired, JB was the smartest horse he ever knew. He was also a character, who for one reason or another decided to drop John one day, right in front of the grandstand. He then galloped off and took his place by the starting gate, leaving John to walk to the gate, as the crowd in the stands cheered. JB had spunk!

Normally one would expect a funeral program to bear the photo of the person being remembered -- not John Edward Ragen. The photo on the front page of his card was none other than that of JB.

Dan said he had an easier time of it when he travelled the racing circuit because of the friends his Dad and Uncle Eddie made along the way.

“Eddie and Dad taught me how to listen to the horses and always do what was best for them. Any success I had in horse racing I owe to them.”



Patti and Dan Regan at Assinboia Downs in the early days.

Of her Uncle Eddie, Patti said:

“Great Uncle Eddie just loved children and having no children of his own, he loved Dan and me like his own grandchildren. My grandad, his brother, died when Dan and I were in third grade, so Uncle Eddie filled that grandfather role for us for all those years after.”

Is there anything like a daughter's love for her father?

“The night of Dad's funeral, as I drove home to our ranch, there was a full moon and an old Tex Ritter tune called ‘Just Beyond the Moon’ (I'll walk just beyond the moon then I'll stop and wait for you) came on the radio. I know someday, I will meet him there.”

Thanks to Patti and Dan for sharing remembrances of their life and times on the backstretch of Assiniboia Downs. You have to believe that Uncle Eddie, their Dad and JB are all...

Nodding their heads in approval!



JB on the front page of John Ragen's funeral program.