

Rockenbach Sleigh Rides 1936 - 1937

by R.S. Rockenbach - February 15, 2003

My brother Ray and I used our dad's bobsled and two huge Belgian horses to make extra money. We had sleigh bells on the horses hames (part of the collars) and straw and heavy blankets for warmth. The rides cost \$5.00 dollars for a load.

One night in January, which was a year of big snowstorms and lasting temperatures of 20° below zero, snow was allowed to accumulate on the roads and became packed. This night, after we had unloaded the sleigh passengers and were heading for home, we were crossing the railroad tracks at Crystal Lake Avenue. There were several pairs of tracks at this crossing. Crossing construction back then is still somewhat the same today. There are underlying cross timbers, then timbers 6" x 6" attached with railroad spikes to the crossed timbers and running parallel to the steel rails, with a spacing between the rails timbers at about a two inch gap.

For better traction on the slippery, hard-packed snow on the streets, the horses were shod with shoes having long cleats or spikes. These were similar to football players' shoes for better traction on the field. They were not so safe for horses crossing railroad tracks.

The horse by the name of Jack got his front hoof caught between the rail and the parallel running timbers and proceeded to fall down on his side. Jack was the more calm of the two horses. Surprisingly Dick, the more nervous of the team, stood patiently by. We were lucky the horse did not fall on the tongue of the sleigh and break it.

Ray and I were nervous wondering when the next train would be coming through with the one horse lying on the crossing. Ray stood by the horses while I got to a phone and called Dad.

Shortly after I left to call Dad, a railroad yardman came along with a pick axe and wedges and spread the space between the rails and the timbers. Jack got up and was ready to go. Just then Dad and Uncle John Catlow from Barrington showed up and we were very relieved of our nerve-racking time. (Uncle John was mother's brother and was visiting at the time).