

# FOURTH OF JULY FIFTY YEARS AGO.

On the afternoon of July 4, 1847, nearly all the people of Chicago gathered at Merrick's race track, on what is now Cottage Grove avenue, at the spot where the Douglas monument stands. Possibly 5,000 persons were there, an enormous crowd in those days. The occasion was the annual athletic entertainment, which in the pioneer days was always a feature of the observance of the Nation's birthday. One event in particular had grown to be a feature of these celebrations. This was a race between a white man on horseback and an Indian on foot, for a prize.

On the day in question there were three contestants in this race. One was an Indian, stripped like a modern prizelighter, and he was the favorite in the contest. His name was White Foot, and, having been the victor during the three successive previous years, he was backed by the crowd as the favorite. The newcomer in the race was Louis Isbell, the colored barber. Isbell is still living in Chicago, and enjoys no common distinction among the rapidly decreasing few who have survived all these years. The crowd wanted to see him win, but they were skeptical as to his ability. The third contestant

was a pioneer astride of a black horse. The race was for a distance of a quarter of a mile straightaway to a turning stake and then back to the starting point. As the signal was given the three contestants started from

a post simultaneously, with the horse in the center. Isbell had the outside track. Everyone knew Isbell. His barbershop was the largest in the

self into white society, however, and modestly remained at home on that occasion.

He lives on West Randolph street now, having moved there within the last year. He came to Chicago in 1838, almost sixty years ago. He has often been called the first barber of this city, but he makes no such claim. In fact, he worked in a shop established in the year before he came by John Johnson, a colored man. He remained in Johnson's employ two years, when he opened a shop of his own in Frink & Walker's stage office, opposite the Tremont House. Then he moved into the Tremont House, and later conducted the shop in the Sherman House. He shaved all the remarkable old men who contributed to make Chicago what it is today.

"I used to shave old William B. Ogden," said Isbell, "at least twice every week. My barber shop was the largest in the city, and everybody used to come there to get shaved. Then they would sit out in front and talk over matters among themselves. Among them were the old Beaubiens, Hubbard, John Wentworth, and Scammon, and Drummond, and Clark, and Garrett, the Burveys, and the Kimballs. There were Jerome Beecher, the Pecks, all of them, and Fernando Jones and his father, the Lafins, and E. B. McCagg, and Luther Lafin Mills and his father. And then there were Dyer, and Dole, and Harmon, and Butterfield, and Moore, and Clybourn, and Wilson. There were the Rumseys, and the Sternses, and all the rest of them."

### Shaves Lincoln and Douglas.

These local celebrities were not the greatest men, however, whom Isbell shaved.

"I have shaved Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, and all the great men when they came to Chicago," said he. "Once I had a little row with Stephen A. Douglas, but we were always good friends, and he often came to my shop and talked with me. Once I went to hear him speak, and he attacked the colored race. He saw me sitting in the audience, and after the meeting was over and he returned to the hotel, he came over to where I was in front of the shop. 'I presume you are mad, are you not, Isbell?' he said to me. 'I saw you in the room when I made that speech against your race.' I told Mr. Douglas at the time I didn't like the way he talked. We were always better friends after that, though, and the great man called often at the shop."

Among Mr. Isbell's collection of papers there is one bearing the signatures of 300 persons, who testify that they have known Louis Isbell for upwards of thirty years, and that "they never knew or heard of anything wrong about him." He values this queer testimonial above every other of his possessions. When these signatures were being placed upon the paper some wanted to add the names of old Chicagoans who had moved away, but Isbell would not permit a forged signature to appear on the testimonial.

### Brought to Illinois as a Slave.

Louis Isbell was born in Prestonsburg, Ky., March 17, 1810. His mother and father were brought to Floyd County from Richmond, Va., by William Mayo, a young Methodist preacher. He had inherited them as slaves, and after coming into possession of his property freed them. When Louis was 3 years of age the kind-hearted Mayo brought him to Paris, Ill., and cared for him in his own home. Thus has Louis Isbell enjoyed the distinction of being the first colored child brought into the State of Illinois to live. He came to Chicago on Oct. 14, 1838, and has made this his home ever since.

town, and all the local celebrities were his patrons. They cheered him lustily in the first half, for, although a few feet behind the horse, he led White Foot. He was the first to start back, however, as the horse could not turn the stake so quickly as his human rivals, and the pioneer jockey was two rods in the rear after turning the stake at the quarter mile, while Isbell was not more than a step ahead of his Indian rival. The latter had seldom been defeated in a foot race, and was trying hard for victory. Isbell won, although he was not a foot in the lead of White Foot, and the horse, hard lashed by the pioneer, came in last. Cheer after cheer greeted the victorious Isbell. A half century has passed since then, but this old colored man relates the story with enthusiasm. He lives in the memories of the past, as do many whom time has rendered feeble.

### Isbell Loses His Next Race.

Three months later the grand-stand at Merrick's was crowded again. The event was another race, in which Louis Isbell took a part.

"There were five of us in that race," says the gray-haired negro, "and hundreds of people had turned out to see it. Three of the contestants were Indians, who came here from Buffalo. The other was an Englishman, whose name was Gildersleeve. The track at Merrick's was a mile around, and the race was to extend ten times that distance. I guess I deceived a good many at that time. You see, I was winded after running one mile, and dropped out to let the others fight it out between them. The Englishman went farther than I did, but didn't finish. The redskins stuck it out to the end, and one of them, with the extraordinary name of Smoke, won."

"I believe I could have won that race had I not got excited on the start. A good many of my patrons at the barber shop were there in carriages, and others were crowded into wagons. The four other fellows were all strangers in Chicago, and everybody wanted me to win. But I tried to do too much. I ran as hard as I could right from the start. All the old-timers were there, and they chased after me in carriages and tried to encourage me on. Consequently I ran all the harder, and when I reached the half-mile post and looked back the others were several rods behind. I was ahead at the end of the first mile, but was winded. I knew I couldn't run around the track nine times more, and so dropped out. I guess my friends were disgusted with me, but I couldn't help it. The sun was hot, and I couldn't have stood it."

"Whenever now I see any of my old friends," continued this old man, "they joke with me about that race. There are not many of them left, though. For some reason, I don't know why, Providence has spared me."

When, eighteen years ago, on the event of its first anniversary, the Calumet club extended a reception to the old settlers of Chicago, gray-haired Louis Isbell was not forgotten. He received an invitation to attend the gathering. He never threw him-