

CLUB MEMORIES: A Look Back at the National Heritage Corridor 25k Run

by Dave Cyplick

On September 23, 1990, the Prairie State Road Runners held their inaugural National Heritage Corridor 25K run on the I&M Canal towpath. Runners were bused to Stratton State Park in Morris and ran back to Channahon. The race, scheduled to start at 8:30 that morning, was delayed because not everyone was bused to the start line in time. Some runners had to drive to Morris and then arrange to be driven back to Morris after the race to retrieve their cars. At that time the bridge at the Aux Sable Creek had not been built so the runners had to maneuver their way around and then back to the towpath. Runners left the towpath at Bridge street in Channahon to work their way over to the finish line where the Frosty Five currently starts. Long time PSRR member Clint Carter was out running on the towpath the day race director Jim Hubbell and future race director Gary Moss started out from Morris and Channahon respectively to map out the 25K course. Keep in mind with no GPS back then, roughing out a course prior to getting it certified was no easy task. The logistical challenges to this point to point course led the club to use an out and back race format thereafter.

In the early 1990's, half marathons were not that common and the 25K proved to be a perfect long distance warm up race for the Chicago Marathon which was held in late October. Many runners came from Chicago to do the race and eventually Chicago Area Runner Association (CARA) Marathon training groups did the race. Hal Higdon, long time Runners World contributor and author of many books on running did the race with his son Kevin, several times. Kevin Higdon won the race at least once during the early years. In his book *Marathon-The Ultimate Training and Racing Guide* (second edition) Hal talks about Marathon running as well as other long races. He said "Among my favorite runs are two 25K races: the popular Old Kent River Bank Run (now Amway River Bank Run) in Grand Rapids, Michigan in May and a lesser-known race along the banks of the Illinois and Michigan Canal in Channahon, Illinois in September.

From 1991 through 1995, Gary Moss was the race director. The race started where the Frosty Five starts and made its way to the towpath via Bridge Street in Channahon. From there, it continued out to McClindon Road and then turned left

and went another mile or so to the turnaround point and then back to Channahon. There were 3 to 4 water stops which the runners could use in each direction. The race grew rapidly in popularity and had more than 500 runners by 1995. Gary had authentic Native American hand-made items such as dream-catchers, dance sticks and deer-skin as age group race awards.

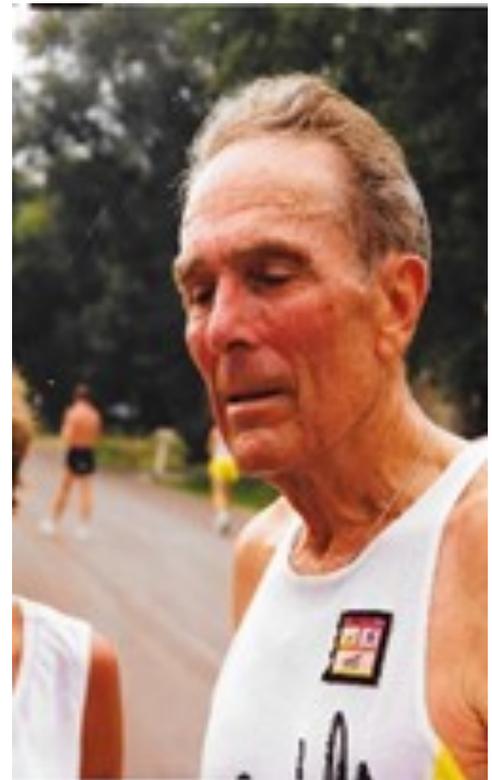
By 1995, Gary Moss had moved to Geneva and Dave Cyplick and Gary Westefer took over as 25K race directors for the 1996 through 1998 races. John Collett, who had ran at North Central College, (and is still a superb runner) held the men's record and Wileen (Willie) Gausmann who had ran at Lewis, set the course record for the ladies of 1:34:15. 1996 was a great year for Illinois runners as Jenny Spangler from Gurnee won the Olympic Marathon Trials and a total of 11 Illinois females ran in the Trials. Two of the qualifiers, Nany Rollins and Charlene Soby, nearly set National age group records at the 1997 25K.

1997 wound up being the peak year for participation in the 25K as 782 runners signed up. That number was close to capacity for the course as we had runners going in both directions on the towpath once they completed the stretch on McClindon Road and came back on the path. At this point, we needed approximately 450 gallons of water and Gatorade plus 75 volunteers to support the course. The Troy Middle School Cross Country team under the direction of John Davis, handled one of the water stops for many years. We also had help from the Joliet West Girls Cross Country team and the Minooka High School teams at various times. The following pictures were taken on Joliet Street just west of Pioneer Path School (Frosty Five), the first picture close to the start and the second one at the finish line.





In 1997, the greatest age group runner in U.S. history, Warren Utes, from Park Forest, ran the 25K. Warren ultimately accumulated 54 U.S. and World age group records and undoubtedly would have set more except for the requirement that he be timed by at least 3 timers for a record to be validated. I had spoken to Warren about 4 weeks before the race and he indicated he would be glad to run if he felt OK after running the Park Forest Scenic Ten Miler on Labor Day. Warren was 77 years old at the time and wanted to set a National age group record at the Scenic 10 which was directed by his son-in-law, Bud James. He shattered the Scenic 10 record and he proceeded to go after the 25K record. He ran the race in 1:52:57, a 7:15 per mile pace. That record still stands in the USATF record book and was a faster pace than the world record for a half marathon by a 75-79 year old. The picture of Warren below was taken shortly after he finished the race. Warren came back and ran when he turned 80, but we weren't able to validate that one.



Mary Jones directed the 25K in 1999 and 2000. In 1999, the men's course record was broken by Greg Lyons, who ran 1:21:35. The second place finisher, Bob Cisler, also broke the old course record with 1:22:49. It was awesome to be working the first water stop and to see the lead runners flying by and then the thundering herd of runners passing through the area on the towpath where the bridge that connects to Moose Island was later built. For the year 2000, the race started and ended by Arrowhead Park in Channahon. We ran towards Rockdale on the towpath with the turnaround being just east of Larkin Avenue. That course was utilized through 2005.



The 2001 race started out with very promising preregistration. It looked like we might have gotten close to or surpassed the 782 runners we had in 1997. Then came the national tragedy of 9/11. Only about 350 of the 444 runners that had preregistered to that point came out for the race. Race Director Jeff Biggs had to place the order for race shirts not being sure what was going to happen. In succeeding years right through 2005, our runner count started to decline as other fall races started up. The Chicago Half Marathon held in September was probably our biggest single problem as many Chicago runners started to do that race rather than the 25k.

Carol Walters directed the 25K in 2002 and 2003. Carol was an excellent runner that ran on the Lucent Technologies Corporate track team for several years and convinced a group of us to head up to Duluth Minnesota to run in Grandma's Marathon in 2002. The 2002 25K was run in very hot conditions and the runners were in rough shape when they crossed the finish line. By 2003, only 379 runners ran the race.

The highlight of the 2003 race was the appearance of Wilson Chepchuwuny from Eldoret, Kenya. Wilson was training for the Chicago Marathon and staying at the home of one of the CARA members. The night before the race he had his first pizza. Apparently, the pizza didn't give him indigestion as he ran the race in a course record 1:18:32.

Mary Jones was back as race director in 2004. The race was the second highest rated CARA race that year and was well received by the runners. Unfortunately, there just weren't enough of them. That led to 2005 when Mary and I directed the race. We had a total of 271 runners that year and took a loss of nearly \$2,000 on the race. The 2005 race was the National Championship 25K for Clydesdale runners.

We decided to discontinue the 25K at that point, realizing that too much competition in the fall no longer made the race viable.

In 2006, we began to hear about Moose Island in Channahon being acquired by the Will County Forest Preserve District. Eventually, we started to think about trying to bring back the 25K in the spring. We even floated the idea of the club putting on a spring Marathon (we only had Chicago at that time) but the problem was that we would be limited by the capacity of the towpath to about 800 runners.



In 2008, we brought back the 25K. It started by the Dow Pavilion, which is the bigger pavilion closer to the Four Rivers Environmental and Educational Center. The race then went over the bridge and out on Blackberry Lane to Bridge Street where we crossed the Canal and turned right at the Bridge street parking lot. From there the rest of the race was on the towpath. The turnaround point was roughly 1.5 miles west

of McClindon road and the finish line about 50 feet from the bathroom where our club picnic is held.

The weather for the 2008 25K was not great. The temperature was about 34 degrees and rainy. About 240 people signed up for the race and maybe 150 showed up. That did not bode well for future years of the race. From 2009-2011, we never had more than 200 runners sign up and we had about 120 runners by 2011 and decided to pull the plug on the race permanently. We did try everything possible to promote the race including ads in Chicago Athlete, race brochures passed out at races like March Madness Half Marathon in Cary and the Western Springs 10K. Facebook Ads, which are great for races weren't an option at that time. Here is a link to a video we did for the 2011 race. It was produced by my son in law, TJ. My daughter Amy is the runner. <https://vimeo.com/16487550>

One story worth sharing from 2009 - I reached out to the Art Department at Minooka High School to see if someone would draw a shirt design for the race. The teacher had the perfect person and they would get right on it. A couple of weeks later, the

teacher called me and said the student wouldn't be able to complete the project. The student had done something that would not allow them to represent the school. The teacher told me don't worry, I have a replacement artist lined up. The end product was a drawing of the locktender's house in Channahon that looked like a haunted house. That was a far different shirt design than the well-done shirt from 2010-2011 that hung proudly at Lallo's until they relocated to their present location.

As I look back and reminisce a little about the 25K and think about the superb reputation it had in the Chicago area for many years, I remember Becky Criscione, one of all-time greats (she won her Chicago Marathon age group by 20 minutes) say to me after seeing cars parked just about everywhere before the race something like "Wow- it's hard to be believe that a club our size can actually do this". But we could do it due to the tremendous number of club volunteers along with our families and the running community. That's my best memory of this race!

