

Clemon Brooks

Author: Merlene Davis

Places: Lexington, Kentucky; Red Bank, New Jersey; New York, New York

Birth: January 15, 1907

Death: November 23, 1998

Professions: Groom, Stallion Man / Stud Manager, Tour Guide



Early Years

Clemon Brooks was born in Cadentown, a small Black settlement east of Lexington, Kentucky. His mother, Mary, died when he was three years old and his father, Clem, was a laborer on nearby farms and later with the C&O Railroad.¹

When Clemon Brooks was young, he took the family horse and wagon out for a free-wheeling joy ride with a few of his friends. To cover-up his lapse of judgment, Brooks and his friends gathered a wagon load of horse weeds and told his father that's why he had taken the horse and wagon without permission. His father was pleased and Brooks escaped punishment.²

Little did he know his story-telling skills and love of horses would become his career.

Honing His Horse Skills

At seventeen, Brooks' first job working with horses was at the Brookdale Farm near Red Bank, New Jersey. Because he was from Kentucky, the workers assumed he was familiar with yearlings. He was not. They gave him a difficult yearling, later named Enchanting, and Brooks managed to bridle him after several attempts. He then followed the horses to racetracks while employed by various trainers including Bennie Creech, who was training for W. R. Coe's Shoshone Stud Farm.³

Shoshone later became Spindletop Farm in Lexington, Kentucky.

After working at Jamaica, Empire City, Aqueduct and Saratoga racetracks in New York for several years, Brooks hitch-hiked back to Kentucky, leaving his wife and child in New York until he could afford to bring them to Lexington.⁴

He worked at Shoshone Farm and Faraway Farm before landing at Leslie Combs II's Spendthrift Farm in 1941, where he worked for more than forty years.⁵

Stud Man and Showman

Brooks, known as Clem by then, was sent to work with stallion studs. He soon became one of the best stud men in the horse industry.⁶

One day Brooks was asked to show a visitor around the farm. His ability to weave a good tale led to his becoming a big draw for busloads of visitors touring the state-of-the-art stud barn Combs built. He soon found a way to earn a little money on the side.

In 1956 Nashua arrived at Spindletop for stud duties. He was Horse of the Year and the world's leading money winner. Nashua and Brooks were soon partners, entertaining visitors together for twenty-five years. Brooks would gather old horseshoes from farriers and offer them to visitors for two dollars a piece, stating they were "off Nashua." He pointed out he never said they had been "on Nashua."⁷

Nashua died in 1982, Combs commissioned artist Liza Todd Tivey, daughter of actress Elizabeth Taylor, to create a half-scale bronze sculpture of Nashua and Brooks as a memorial at Nashua's grave. The impression of a horseshoe is showing through Brook's pocket.⁸

Legacy

Brooks is one of only a few black horsemen remembered for his captivating narratives that entertained visitors and who has been memorialized in bronze.

Brooks died in 1998 at age ninety-one. He and his wife, Margaret Ross Brooks, who died in 1965, had a daughter and a son.

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Footnotes

¹"Horse Tales," Maryjean Wall, Lexington Herald. February 19, 1981.

²Kirkpatrick, Arthur. "Clem." Keeneland Magazine.

³Kirkpatrick, Arthur. "Clem." Keeneland Magazine.

⁴"Interview with Clem Brooks, January 14, 1987."

⁵Kirkpatrick, Arthur. "Clem." Keeneland Magazine.

⁶Kirkpatrick, Arthur. "Clem." Keeneland Magazine.

⁷Kirkpatrick, Arthur. "Clem." Keeneland Magazine.

⁸Karon, Frances J. "Running Rough Shod: Clem's Smile."