

Cunningham Graves

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Places: Maddoxtown, Fayette County,
Kentucky

Birth: September 15, 1899

Death: April 24, 1963

Professions: Groom



Childhood and Family

Cunningham Graves was born to George and Betty Graves.¹ They lived in Lexington, where he worked odd jobs. In the 1930's, they returned to Maddoxtown.² He grew up in Lexington, Kentucky in Maddoxtown. Maddoxtown, established in 1871, is located along Huffman Mill Pike. It was one of the many free towns in central Kentucky. The town continued to grow and within a few years, several families lived there and worked on farms in the area.³ Graves' family and friends called him "Bub."

In 1917, Cunningham married Lou Willie Williams and they had five children.⁴

Career Highlights

While working as a groom at Faraway Farm, Cunningham took care of War Admiral and War Relic, the offspring of Man o' War.⁵ Man o' War is known to be the greatest racehorse ever.⁶ The horse had a long career of breaking records and he won twenty out of twenty-one races.⁷ During a typical day at the farm, War Admiral severely injured Graves. The horse kicked Graves in the mouth knocking out his front teeth while he was loading him in the van.⁸ War Admiral, a 1937 American Triple Crown winner, was known to have a bad temper and be difficult to handle.⁹ Cunningham recovered and continued to work with horses.

During the winter months, Graves traveled with the horses. They went to racetracks in Hot Springs, Arkansas, and Hialeah, Florida. In the spring of 1946, he began taking care of Man o' War when Will Harbut, Man o' War's second stud groom, became ill. Harbut suffered a stroke and he could no longer care for the horse. Cunningham often referred to the chestnut stallion as "The Boss."¹⁰

Legacy and Death

Graves' legacy is that he has the distinction of holding the reins of Man o' War in one of the horse's last few photographs.¹¹ The image above was captured on October 29, 1947, the day of Man o' War's thirtieth birthday celebration at the farm. It was just three days before the horse's death.¹² After the photo was taken, Man o' War backed up and went down on one knee. Graves remarked that the horse was tired and that he had better take "The Boss" back into the stall. Man o' War laid down once he got into the stall and he never got up again.¹³ Graves was one of only three people that were present at the time of Man o' War's death. Patrick O'Neill, the farm manager, and veterinarian, Dr. William McGee, were also there.¹⁴

The image of Graves with Man o' War is a great example of the role that he played in the history of the horse industry. Many African Americans were great horsemen. The photograph allows you to visualize such relationships and their skills. Graves' story will never be forgotten as it earned him a place in the archives of the racing industry. He was buried at the Maddoxtown Cemetery.¹⁵

Sources

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Footnotes

¹Death Certificate

²1930 Census

³NKAA Database

⁴Fayette County Marriage Record

⁵Shulman

⁶Talbott ("Man o' War")

⁷Encyclopedia Britannica ("Man o' War")

⁸Shulman

⁹Encyclopedia Britannica ("War Admiral")

¹⁰Livingston

¹¹Paulick Report

¹²Shulman

¹³The Vault

¹⁴Shulman

¹⁵Find-a-grave memorial #32582428