

Eugene Carter

Author: Merlene Davis

Places: Maddoxtown, Lexington, Kentucky; Belmont, New York; Delaware; Florida; Hot Springs, Arkansas; Aiken, South Carolina

Birth: July 16, 1926

Death: September 24, 2019

Professions: Jockey, Groom, Exercise Rider



Early Years

Eugene Carter, Jr., grew up in Maddoxtown, a small African American community north of Lexington, Kentucky. Freedmen settled the community after the Civil War.¹ Most of the men living there either farmed or worked on one of the nearby horse farms. Despite his father being a tobacco farmer, Carter, known as “Rudy” in the community, chose working with horses.

Carter wanted to be a jockey. At 15, he persuaded his mother to let him forego the long bus ride to a segregated school in Lexington, and find a job with horses. In 1941, he landed work as an exercise rider at Elsmear Farm when the assigned rider came late to work one too many times.²

Career Beginnings

In 1941 Carter broke yearlings for Cy White, who trained horses for the Ogden Phipps stable. White was the first of many trainers who called Carter a natural horseman.³

Carter gleaned some of his knowledge of horses while watching the legendary groomer Will Harbut expertly handle the notoriously high-strung Man o’ War, also known as Big Red. Carter watched as Harbut talked to Man o’ War as he would a person.⁴ During one of his visits, Carter was fond of saying, Harbut allowed the young Carter to briefly sit astride the legendary champion. He said Harbut told him he was the last living person to do that.

The connection between Harbut and Big Red was so strong, the Thoroughbred lived only one month after Harbut fell ill and died. Carter also had another reason to visit Harbut on Faraway Farm: to get in the groom’s good graces and date his daughter, Lillian, a classmate. After serving in the Navy as a submariner during World War II, Carter married Lillian. Their marriage lasted 56 years.

In addition to White, Carter worked for:

- Doug Davis at High Hope Farm
- Andy Shetland at Belmont Race Track
- Bruce Hundley with Saxony Farm
- Keeneland Racecourse
- Kentucky Horse Park, where he was known as Gene.

Dream Comes True

In 1967, after exercising horses at Churchill Downs in Louisville, Kentucky, Davis asked Carter to return to Lexington and ride Royal Matter in the second running of the High Hope Steeplechase. Carter had always wanted to be a jockey, but many states refused to license African American jockeys at that time because of segregation laws.

Carter's family was forced to stand outside the track because of Jim Crow laws. They were waiting to take him home at the end of a long work day. As the horses raced, Carter's family noticed he was on board Royal Matter and in the lead. They witnessed Carter winning his only race.⁵

After that winning ride, Carter returned to his job conditioning horses rather than guiding them across the finish line. He exercised Davis' Annihilate 'Em, a horse he also broke as a yearling, for the 1973 Travers Stakes at Saratoga. He led the Thoroughbred to the post and handed the reins to jockey Ron Turcotte who rode the horse to victory.

Later Years

After Davis died in 1976, Carter worked on Saxony Farm for the next 25 years, where he broke yearlings and led some to the sales ring for owner Bruce Hundley. He retired in 2002.

Legacy

When Carter's wife died in 2003, he looked for something to do to take his mind off his loss. He found seasonal work at the Kentucky Horse Park Hall of Champions, working with retired race horses such as Cigar, John Henry, Funny Cide and others.⁶ He regaled visitors for fourteen years with stories of famous horses and, of course, how he was the last living person to sit on Man o' War. He died at age 93, the father of nine children, and possessing at least one deferred dream that came true.

Sources

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Footnotes

¹Eugene Carter Obituary."

²Blackford, "At 90, Horseman Who Once Sat on Man o' War, Is Working at Kentucky Horse Park."

³Blackford, "At 90, Horseman Who Once Sat on Man o' War, Is Working at Kentucky Horse Park."

⁴Voss, "The Last Man To Ride Man o' War Looks Back On A Lifetime With Horses."

⁵Blackford, "At 90, Horseman Who Once Sat on Man o' War, Is Working at Kentucky Horse Park."

⁶Bush, Robin, "Kentucky Horse Park Employee Gene Carter Reflects on Career with Famous Thoroughbreds."