

John Joe Hughes, Jr.

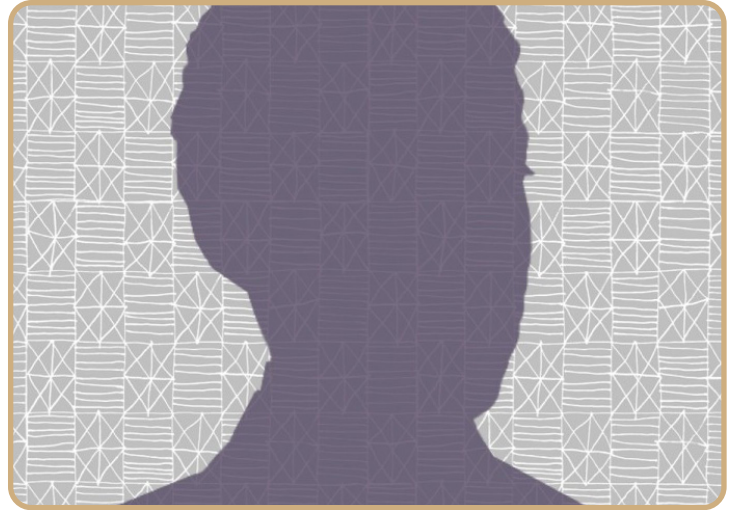
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Places: Frankfort, Franklin County,
Kentucky

Lexington, Fayette County, Kentucky

Birth: May 9, 1926 **Death:**

Professions: Groom, Exercise Rider



Birth and Family

John Joe Hughes, son of John and Mattie, was born in 1926 in Frankfort, Kentucky. At the age of eighteen, Hughes worked as a porter at the Kentucky Hotel in Lexington. He and his mother lived in Bluegrass-Aspendale apartments. The housing complex, built by the Lexington Housing Authority, stood on the former Kentucky Association racetrack in East Lexington.¹

John married and became father of a son John. He and his wife divorced.²

Telling His Story

Hughes told his story during an oral history interview in 2019. He, like other young men of the Jim Crow and Migration Era, looked for a better job. He chose working with horses. He started by being an exercise boy, getting the horses ready in the morning for the race in the afternoon. "Limbering them up," he explained. He also helped transport horses to and from race meets. After serving several years as an exercise boy, he was drafted for military service during World War II.³

Following discharge from service, Hughes returned to working with horses. In 1950 he and Lafe Johnson were employed by George Oldham of New York. They exercised and trained Thoroughbreds in Florida. Hughes came back to Kentucky in 1960. He found work as a groom with trainer John J. "Bud" Greely at Keeneland in Lexington.⁴

Separate and Unequal

Hughes worked during a time when segregation was in effect. He noted that everyone worked together in the barn, tending to their horses. When it came time to eat, Blacks went to a separate dining area. If they wanted to watch a race, they sat in an area of the grandstand designated for "colored" spectators. Hughes asked an employer about the

pay he was receiving compared to others. He was told, "It is not about me, John, it's the system." Hughes said that he experienced the same discrimination while serving in the military.⁵

Final Decision

Three times during his career, Hughes left to find better paying jobs. Each time he came back to what he loved doing, working with Thoroughbreds at Keeneland. One day he looked over the green grass and asked himself a question. What AM I doing here? At the age of fifty, he made his final decision. He would not stay with horses.⁶

Documenting His Legacy

John Joe Hughes saved licenses, track passes and several photos. They document his work as an exerciser and groom at racetracks in Arkansas, California, New Jersey and New York. He kept a photo of himself, holding the lead of Ein Prosit. The Thoroughbred won at Delaware Park in 1967.⁷ These items tell others of the contributions Hughes made to the racing industry.

Hughes stopped working with horses but he was still interested in racing's history so he began collecting news articles, program booklets, books and photos. Jockeys Isaac Murphy and Jimmy Winkfield, grooms Eugene Carter and Eddie Sweat and Jackie Thompson, a farrier, are the focus of his collection.

Hughes recorded his oral history at the age of ninety-three. When asked how he had made it this far. He said that he had a mother who cared, who prayed for him. He repeats daily the words she said to him. "You will be alright."⁸

Sources

Hughes, John, Jr., 2019. interview by Marilyn Dishman. Chronicle of African Americans in the Horse Industry Oral History Project. Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History. University of Kentucky Libraries <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt7x253dmc045>

World War II Draft Cards for Kentucky, 10/16/1940 - 03/31/1947. Record Group 147: Records of the Selective Service System, 1926-1975; Box 322. John Joe Hughes. May 15, 1944.

Hughes, John. 2019. Donated photo. File 07019_14.jpg

Footnotes

¹World War II Draft Registration Cards for Kentucky, 10/16/1940 - 03/31/1947. Record Group 147: Records of the Selective Service System, 1926-1975; Box 322. John Joe Hughes

²Hughes, John. 2019. Chronicle of African Americans in the Horse Industry Oral History Project

³Hughes

⁴Hughes

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