

# William Luther Harbut

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**Places:** Lexington, Kentucky

**Birth:** April 17, 1883 **Death:** October 3, 1947

**Professions:** Groom



## Childhood and Family

William "Will" Luther Harbut, was born in Lexington, Kentucky to Sam and Sue Ella Smith Harbut.<sup>1</sup> He married Mary Lizzie Payne on September 20, 1905 and they had twelve children.<sup>2</sup> The family lived in Maddoxtown, a freetown established by former slaves in Lexington.<sup>3</sup>

## Early Career

After moving to Maddoxtown, Harbut worked for several local horsemen. The list of horsemen includes Colonel Phil T. Chinn, and the late senator, J. W. Bailey. He also worked at Walnut Hall Farm and Glen-Helen Stud. It was at Glen-Helen Stud, that farm manager Harrie B. Scott, Sr., learned to appreciate Harbut's work as a great horseman. In 1930, Scott accepted a new farm manager's position at Faraway Farm, owned by Samuel Doyle Riddle. Harbut accompanied Scott to Faraway to work as a groom.<sup>4</sup>

## Working with Man o' War

At the farm, Harbut's job was that of a typical horse groom, to feed and care for a horse. However, he performed his job a bit differently.

He catered to every need and want of Man o' War, a chestnut colored American Thoroughbred horse, often referred to as "Big Red" or "Red."<sup>5</sup> Man o' War was, and is still, known as the greatest racehorse of the twentieth century. Big Red had a long career of breaking records and he won twenty out of twenty-one races. He retired to the farm in 1921.<sup>6</sup>

Harbut replaced John Buckner, who worked as Man o' War's groom from 1921 to 1930.<sup>7</sup> To prepare for his job at Faraway Farm, Harbut studied Man o' War's racing records.

In his rich baritone voice, Harbut recited Man o' War's great racing achievements as he

presented him.<sup>8</sup> Thousands of visitors came to the farm to watch them.<sup>9</sup> A few of Big Red's accomplishments that Harbut would include when praising him are:

- He set five American records, seven track records, and the odds were for him to win in every race that he ran.
- In 1920, he became the first North American Thoroughbred to exceed \$200,000 in total earnings.
- His son, War Admiral, won the Triple Crown in 1937.
- His grandson, Seabiscuit, became one of the greatest money winners from 1935 to 1940.<sup>10</sup>

Visitors would watch Man o' War gaze into the distance as Harbut presented him and praised him. He would say, "He's just the mostest hoss that ever was." Harbut would end his presentation by saying there was nothing else for Man o' War to do, but retire.<sup>11</sup>

He and Big Red were photographed together thousands of times. In 1941, Harbut and Man o' War were on the cover of the Saturday Evening Post.<sup>12</sup> It was estimated that 30,000 to 50,000 people visited Faraway Farm to see the famous horse and Harbut.<sup>13</sup>

## Legacy and Death

Harbut's legacy was that of a long-time dedicated groom and friend to the greatest horse of the time. Some might say that he was equally the greatest groom of that time.

In April of 1946, Will had a stroke and was unable to return to work.<sup>14</sup> Cunningham Graves took over as Big Red's groom until the horse's death.<sup>15</sup> During his illness, Harbut missed Man o' War, his partner of seventeen years, and often asked about him. Harbut passed away on October 3, 1947. He was buried in the Maddoxtown Baptist Church Cemetery.<sup>16</sup> Man o' War passed away a month after Harbut's death.<sup>17</sup>

Additional members of the Harbut family have followed in his footsteps. His son, Tom, and his great grandson, Greg, owned horses that participated in the Kentucky Derby.<sup>18</sup> Greg still owns the horse, Necker Island, who continues to participate in horse racing. It will be interesting to see the future contributions the Harbut family will make.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Memorial Page for William Luther 'Willie' Harbut (1885-1947)."; "Death Certificate: William Luther Harbut" October 3, 1947. Fayette County, Kentucky

<sup>2</sup>County Marriage Record

<sup>3</sup>Talbott (Maddoxtown)

<sup>4</sup>(Lexington Herald) "Will Harbut, Man o' War's Groom, Dies."

<sup>5</sup> Britannica

<sup>6</sup>Talbott (Man o' War)

<sup>7</sup>Keeneland Library

<sup>8</sup>Ours, Dorothy

<sup>9</sup>(Lexington Herald) "Will Harbut, Man o' War's Groom, Dies."

<sup>10</sup>Britannica

<sup>11</sup>Lexington Herald-Leader (Groom's Son...)

<sup>12</sup>Ours, Dorothy

<sup>13</sup>Lexington Herald-Leader "Will Harbut, Man o' War's Groom, Dies."

<sup>14</sup>New York Times

<sup>15</sup>"Chasing Man o' War's Ghost."

<sup>16</sup>Memorial Page for William Luther 'Willie' Harbut (1885-1947)."

<sup>17</sup>"Chasing Man o' War's Ghost."

<sup>18</sup>Lexington Herald-Leader ""As He Heads to 'Bittersweet' First Derby, Owner Hopes to Reopen Industry to Black Horsemen."; Harbut ( "Harbut Legacy: History with Man o' War, Great Grandfather, and Father," )