Oscar Dishman, Jr.

Author: Emily Hudson - Story Catcher

Places: New Zion, Kentucky; Dayton, Ohio

Birth: September 14, 1923
Death: October 1, 2000

Professions: Trainer, Groom, Exercise Rider, Owner

Birth and Childhood, Family

Oscar Dishman, Jr. was born September 14, 1923 in Lexington, Kentucky. He was raised in the historic African American community of New Zion in Scott County, Kentucky. His parents Oscar, Sr., and Anna L. Henderson were also born here.[1]

Dishman spent his summers on his grandparents' leased 200-acre farm in Scott County where he learned how to work. His grandfather, known as "Pap Dish" by family, raised hogs, cattle, and he had pleasure horses. Riding the pleasure horses fueled his interest and love for horses.

Dishman's father spent most of his life working on a racehorse farm in Fayette County. This stable was owned by C. V. Whitney.[2] Dishman shares, "My father knew everything you wanted to know about horses at that time. That's where my brother (Clarence) and I got started on weekends."[3]

Career and Notable Achievements

Dishman learned about horses as a teenager but began his career in the Thoroughbred horse industry at the age of twenty-seven. He worked as an exercise rider and groom at Keeneland racetrack in Lexington, Kentucky. He also worked at Latonia Downs.

Dishman taught himself how to ride by observing others. He evolved from groom to exercise rider, and then trainer. "I wanted to be a trainer. I wanted to benefit from the past experience I've had from grooming and exercising and put it into work as a trainer," Dishman shared. When work with the horses was slow, he made extra money by moonlighting as a barber at River Downs.

In 1960 Dishman landed a job with Dr. Archie Donaldson for whom he trained Silver Series, winning the 1977 American Derby. Archie Donaldson was a Black doctor from Nassau, Bahamas.[4] Dishman's first win as a trainer was in 1961 with the horse Mary-El-Du at River Downs in Cincinnati.[5]

A few of his most notable achievements include training the winning horses for the:

-1973 Michigan Mile
-Ohio Derby
-Hawthorne Stakes
-The Widener Handicap (1977-1978)[6]

Other horses trained by Dishman include:

-Golden Don
-November Tender
-The Messenger
-Zoneage
-Miracle Shoes
-Miss Boyd

Acceptance and Expertise

Dishman speaks about his acceptance as a Black trainer in the horse industry in the midst of desegregation and racism. "I was accepted up to a certain point. As long as I was winning, everyone loved a winner; but if I lost, they began to talk about me. After awhile, it got to the point where I could do anything I wanted to do because my name was Oscar Dishman and I had won a lot of races." Dishman was the only Black trainer at the horse sales he and Donaldson attended.

Donaldson benefitted from Dishman's experience and knowledge of horses. Because of his past experience as a groom and exercise rider, Dishman could look at a horse's body build and legs and tell whether it was a good or bad horse. During this time, Donaldson had ten to fifteen horses in training; Dishman had his own stable of forty-five horses.[7]

Military and Civil Rights

In addition to serving over two years in the Army, Dishman was also a civil rights activist. He attended a two-room school for Black students in New Zion. The school was in poor condition. Second-hand books were missing pages, and the teachers were paid less than their White counterparts. In the face of violence and threats, Dishman filed a lawsuit in 1956 against the Scott County Board of Education, contributing to desegregation of the public schools.[8]

The Legacy of a Legend

Throughout his career that included forty years as a Thoroughbred trainer, Dishman overcame many challenges faced by Blacks in the horse industry. His peak years as a trainer were 1976-1978.

He was awarded the Black Achievement Award in Lexington for his distinguished career and also received the Isaac Murphy Award in 1993. On April 22, 1978, Dishman was recognized as "The Most Outstanding Black Trainer" during the Black Identity's Evening of Award and Entertainment held at the Lexington Hyatt Regency.[9] At one point, he served as Director on the board of the Horsemen's Benevolent & Protective Association.

Oscar Dishman, Jr. died at the Samaritan Hospital in Lexington, Kentucky at the age of seventy-seven after a lengthy illness.

Sources

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Footnotes

[1]Oscar Dishman, Jr.

[2]"Oscar Dishman, Jr. Has a Winning Horse."

[3]Dishman, Jr., Interview.

[4]Dishman, Jr., Interview

[5]"Kentucky Historical Society."

[6]Dishman, Jr., Interview

[7]Dishman, Jr., Interview

[8]Interview with Marilyn Dishman

[9]Interview with Marilyn Dishman