

## **Another Road Horse Legend Laid To Rest** **Thursday, January 12, 2006**

by Bob Funkhouser

With the passing of Pres Oder earlier in the year the road horse world lost one of its greats. The show horse industry was saddened with the loss of yet another legend with the Jan. 5 passing of Willie "Jackrabbit" Bottoms. A large crowd of horse people and local residents were on hand for his funeral services with James Dean, Jerry Mobley, David Yoder, Glen Walker, Danny Bugg, and Chris Short serving as pall bearers. Bottoms was 72.

Rabbit, as he was called by his friends and peers, was an icon in Central Kentucky where he was born and raised and his expertise with a road horse was known industry-wide. More importantly he was a kind soul who was known to give the shirt off his back to anyone in need even when he didn't have a shirt to give.

The man with a big smile always had a kind word for everyone. Bottoms was also a religious man who was called upon many, many times to sing Amazing Grace at funerals bringing all those who heard him to tears. In fact, a recording of him singing his favorite song was playing during his service.

While Bottoms was a giant teddy bear that cared for and about others more than he did himself, he was a great competitor in the ring. Friendships were left at the gate and usually he had enough horse to beat you.

"Rabbit had a lot of ability. He had a way with road horses and he could make a good one out of an average horse," said fellow Hall of Fame trainer Raymond Shively who along with Sam Stafford, Jim Powell, James Williams, James Bryant, and Jim Pittman were honorary pallbearers. "I've known Rabbit for more than 50 years and he's been a good friend. He and Peanuts [Gaines] and I have spent a lot of time together.

"He was also a fierce competitor. He had no fear. Rabbit was just as comfortable driving in a pack as he was out on the rail by himself. He always showed his horse. You could count on him trying to beat you if he were in the ring with you. And showing against him at Harrodsburg was something else. That crowd was always behind him no matter what he was driving.

"Even though he was a great competitor, if I beat him he was the first one back to the barn to congratulate me and I would do the same when he beat me. If he didn't have a horse showing against me he would always come back and give me tips. He helped me a lot with horses like Nonstop and The Natural."

Willie "Jackrabbit" Bottoms was the first black man inducted into the American Road Horse and Pony Hall Of Fame. He was also the first and only black man to date to win a World's Grand Championship a feat he accomplished with R.P.M.

Bottoms worked for the Freeman Brothers of Harrodsburg, Ky., for several decades and later on his own with customers like local road horse enthusiast Danny Bugg.

"He was a fun person to be around. It was always a good time with Rabbit," said Bugg. "I've been around him my whole life and he always did for others. I don't know, he was like a big brother or an uncle to me.

"Rabbit taught me everything I know about road horses. 'Be ring wise' was his favorite expression. I know he told me and Milward [Dedman] that a thousand times. He taught me to look around and pay attention to where the others are and to keep on the rail as much as possible. Another thing he always told me was, 'This is a not a horse race, it's a horse show.'"

As Shively described him, Bottoms was a man with a lot of talent. He proved that talent over the years with many great horses and ponies. In addition to World's Grand Champion R.P.M. that list would include Shoe Shine Boy, Air Express, Invader, Shane, Maximillian, Giant Killer, Auctioneer, Royal Flush, Switchblade, Hustlin' Harriett, Diablo, Miss Dean Key, Summertime, Sting Ray, Bostonian, Tinkerbelle, Riptide, Sonic

Song, Dragster, and Spill The Ink.

Many of those horses and ponies were trained for the Freeman Brothers of Harrodsburg, Ky., and their grandson Milward Dedman. Dedman was one of the speakers at Bottoms' funeral and the following is what he delivered:

On behalf of the Bottoms family I want to thank you for being here today. We are here to celebrate the life of a true legend, Willie "Jack Rabbit" Bottoms. Rabbit, as I affectionately called him, was born in Cornishville, a small rural community here in Mercer County. In the 1930s and 40s no one would have imagined that a young African American man could achieve so much in the Saddle Horse industry, not even Rabbit himself. His first love was no doubt his Lord, but following closely behind was the horse, especially the road horse. And because of that the rest is history.

As a teenager Rabbit started hanging out around the horse barns at the Mercer County Fair Grounds and that is where he became acquainted with my grandfather and his two brothers, R.C. and Marshall Freeman. He started by hot walking and grooming horses but it wasn't long before he took over the training duties. From that point history wrote itself. Except for under saddle classes, horses trained by Jack Rabbit have won every road horse class there is at the World's Championship Horse Show in Louisville including bike, wagon, amateur, novice, county fair, and the USTA Classic. This is quite an accomplishment but the real accomplishment is that these classes were not won by horses that were bought for large sums of money but rather horses that were made by Rabbit himself.

His greatest moment came in the late 1980s when Mary Glenn Martin sent a big bay gelding to Barn 3 at the fairgrounds named RPM. In Rabbit style, no one would know what he had because he was determined that this horse would not be seen. He would work RPM at 5 o'clock in the morning, in the dark, so that no one around the fair ground would be able to observe. He once told me, "All they would do is criticize him so I'm not going to give them the chance." Rabbit and his mystery horse went on to win the \$10,000 Roadster to Bike World's Grand Championship. Another shining moment in this legend's life came in 1991 when he was inducted into the American Road Horse and Pony Hall of Fame. Rabbit was quick to tell you that he was the only African American man in the Hall of Fame and he was very proud of that fact. Then, once again, we gathered to salute this legend only five short months ago when Rabbit made his final victory pass and was inducted into the Mercer County Fair and Horse Show Hall of Fame. I was honored to be by his side as the crowd cheered and celebrated with this great horseman. Rabbit knew that was his last ride and he was O.K. with that. He told me in a weak voice, "All of my friends are here and now I can go home." Rabbit wasn't talking about his home at the nursing facility; he was talking about his heavenly home.

As successful as Willie Bottoms was as a horseman, he will be remembered by me because of his big heart. Rabbit would give you the shirt off his back. Many times he would give even when he didn't have it to give. On several occasions he would stand, knocking on my back door. When I would ask him what he needed he would tell me he would like to borrow 50 or 100 dollars. He once told me of a young lady who could not afford to buy diapers for her child and he needed to help her. He would always say, "Now you know, I'll pay you back." And in a few days that knock would come again and there was Rabbit repaying his debt. I would try not to take it and he would say, "You have to because I might need to borrow from you again." This is the Rabbit I will always remember.

This is a very sad day for me because I have lost someone very dear to me. I learned to drive sitting in this man's lap when my legs were too short to reach the stirrups of the road bike. But this is also a happy day, because I know that Rabbit is no longer in this weak and frail body. He has left here to meet his maker at the gates of heaven, who has gladly welcomed him in. He is once again strong, full of life, and has that twinkle back in his eye. And I can bet you one thing, Rabbit is singing Amazing Grace and on a wild search for that next great road horse. He is also preparing for the day when he can once again see "All his Friends".

Rabbit, I thank you for your friendship and the memories that I will treasure forever. I love you "Big Man".

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