
Posted on Tue, Aug. 15, 2006

Black horsemen get their due in a son's tribute

By Dwayne Campbell
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For a 10-year-old boy, spending a weekend in the company of men - expert horse trainers - working side-by-side, listening to their conversations, and sharing their equine victories can leave a lasting memory.

Lee E. Downing experienced that weekend treat in 1959 with his father, Thomas Downing, a dedicated horse trainer, and his father's friends, African American men who held similar jobs in the American Saddlebred show-horse business.

In *A Forgotten Horseman: A Son's Weekend Memoir* (\$26, hardcover), Downing, who lives in North Wales, pays tribute to his father and other black horse trainers who, over months of rehearsing and grooming, prepared the horses for show competition.

He self-published the book this year, and will sign copies today from noon to 2 p.m. at Borders bookstore at Liberty Place.

Set over one weekend, *A Forgotten Horseman* centers on a 10-year-old Downing and his father at Ohio's Canfield Fairgrounds horse show, the first - and the last - that the young Downing would attend.

Though he loved horses as much as his father, his parents discouraged a horseman career because they wanted a "better" life for him, a life away from the prejudices that kept black horsemen in the background.

"When I started, I wanted to write about the valuable lessons I learned from my father," Downing said, "but I also wanted to tell people he was one of a dedicated group of saddlehorse trainers who worked hard but never got the recognition."

That will partially change next year, as the American Saddlebred Museum in Lexington, Ky., will mount its first full-scale exhibition honoring African American horsemen, "Out of the Shadows: Bringing to Light Black Horsemen in Saddlebred History." Curator Kim Skipton says she plans to have Downing sign books at the exhibition, planned for Feb. 15 to Dec. 31.

As was customary in those days, Thomas Downing and most other black trainers worked for white horse owners and knew their place. Few of those owners allowed black trainers to also ride in the shows, the crowning glory of the industry where ribbons and trophies were publicly awarded in front of show-horse fans.

Still, the senior Downing and other trainers in North Canton, Ohio (most of whom trained in Kentucky horse country, then moved elsewhere for better jobs), labored with unbridled camaraderie. The men worked hard but found time to rib each other, listen to Sam Cooke and Fats Domino, and muse on the accomplishments of Jackie Robinson and the occasional black trainer, such as Tom Bass, who managed to gain national renown.

Downing also stresses the strong male relationships - father and son, father-figure and son, friends - a universal theme that transcends time and setting, even that period of racial inequality. In fact, those bonds among black men seem more important in the limiting days of the 1950s.

"It was a small fraternity of men," Downing said. "They were competitive, they wanted to win, but behind that they supported each other. They were all subjected to the same social injustices."

A Forgotten Horseman doesn't dwell on race, but uses it to put the horse trainers' lives into a historical context. Just as there were racial barriers for trainers, there are ones for baseball players, youth, even for black men who pull up to service stations.

In the book, the young Downing is perplexed that black people had to fill up their own trucks at a gas station but whites were taken care of by attendants. His father, a very collected man, eased his young mind, "Don't think nothin' 'bout it,"

he says. "Any man that can't pump his own gas ain't a real man anyway."

"Race was definitely a factor. There was overt and subtle racism, but my father tried to protect me from the overt part," Downing said. "That's what families did back then."

While Downing didn't become a horseman, his father and the other trainers left him with lessons about humility, patience and good character - the traits they brought to work every day and the traits that compelled them to do outstanding jobs behind the scenes.

Downing had long pondered writing a book honoring his father, who passed away in 1965. In 1988, after his own life was saved by a liver transplant, Downing wrote a paragraph that appears in the book's prologue, describing his father's deathbed.

Some years later, after hearing legendary basketball coach Jim Valvano talk on TV about doing things important to you before you die, Downing pushed himself to expand the lone paragraph and refocused his life.

He swapped teaching high school and college for work in the transplant advocacy field and carved out time to write at nights.

While researching the book, Downing realized that information about, and accolades for, the black horse trainers of that era were extremely limited. There were a few books, including ones on Bass and his noted equestrian accomplishments, but not much more.

"I wasn't sure if I could write this or if it would be meaningful to anybody else," Downing said. "But I said, 'You know what, I'm going to honor these men the best way I can.' "

Now that he's done some of the heavy lifting, Downing is hoping a major publisher - or a documentary filmmaker - might see the work's merit and want to help spread knowledge about the unheralded horsemen.

"Horse training wasn't just a job, it was a way of life. These men did it with respect, dignity and courage," Downing said. "That's something that needs to be remembered."

Author's Book Signing

Lee E. Downing will sign copies of *A Forgotten Horseman: A Son's Weekend Memoir* from noon to 2 p.m. today at Borders bookstore at Liberty Place and from 4 to 6 p.m. on Sept. 8 at Borders at the Gallery at Market East.

For additional information on black horse trainers, visit www.blackhorsemen.com.

The American Saddlebred Museum in Lexington, Ky., plans to mount an exhibition about black horsemen - from caretakers to trainers - next year and is looking for photos, trophies, ribbons, newspaper clippings and other memorabilia from the days after the Civil War through the 1970s. Contact the museum curator Kim Skipton at 859-259-2746 or ashmks@mis.net.

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