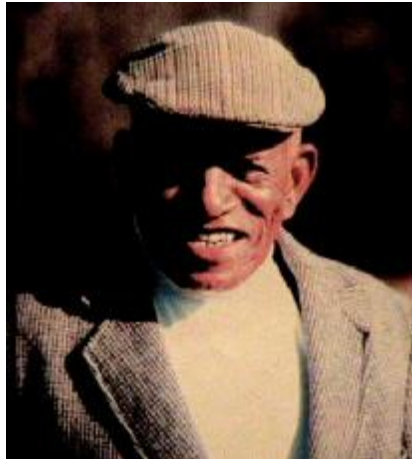


**MELVIN DIXON: The man who didn't let race stop him from showing
By Pam Rigaux**

A hundred years ago some of the greatest jockeys in horse racing were Black. In the 1930's African-Americans were again prominent in steeplechase racing. This was the case in the show hunters and jumper arena where opportunities for Black were almost unheard, with one exception-Melvin Dixon.



Melvin Dixon, a Fredericksburg, VA native, crossed racial boundaries to become one of the top trainers in jumping and hunting.



At the Upperville Horse show last week, no Black's rode in the hunter class. This was not surprise to Dixon, who under his faded-straw hat, watched thoroughbreds jump 3-foot fences like lines drawn in the sand. Dixon's dark angular face has a slight under bite and soft expression cultivated from years of practice nurturing horses and riders. Forgetting the distance between him and the riders and forgetting his 83 years of age; he watched the mistakes of riders as if he was a judge.

My friends would stand outside of the fence and say, you rode well, but the Judges never did. Dixon, son of a dairyman, understood hunting as well as anyone, and proved it by putting up the first woman to ever win the Maryland Hunt Club Championship-Joy Slater.



He remembers the day he called to New Jersey after reading the classified ad in the Chronicle of the Horse-it was a long distance call, so he got straight to the point. I am a colored man. After talking with Mrs. Slater, she wanted to meet him. She arranged for him to come to Far Hills, NJ for an interview and he was hired on the spot. He worked with Mrs. Slater and her daughter for 11 years, as a stable manager and Joy's trainer.

Dixon did some training on his own; he bought and sold 37 horses. One of his favorites was a big red gelding named Kansas Clown. Kansas Clown jumped a 6 foot 7 inch wall in a Minnesota show known as the Puissance. Dixon was the second Black man ever to try it.



I loved that horse Dixon recalls; he was one inch away from winning. As Kansas Clown approached the wall, Dixon was not sure if he would jump or stop and send him flying in the air. He did not stop, he took the bit and we both flew. Dixon came in second because his horse toppled a block off the top of the jump. It was almost perfect.

Dixon's beloved horse, Kansas Clown lived for 42 years. Longevity is a lifetime habit for Dixon, his mother live to be 112 years old. Married at 15, his marriage lasted for 59 years, and he fathered 9 children. The only thing that was not long lasting was his education. "Blacks were not encouraged to stay in school. I grew up in an all White neighborhood and only saw Blacks when I went to school." Instead, he helped his Indian father drive a milk wagon until his hands blistered.



At age 83, Dixon was still jumping 6-foot fences. He lived in Middleburg, VA for 10 years, where he would Fox Hunt with Mrs. Jackie Kennedy. Many successful horsemen know him, like Randy Waterman, Master of the Piedmont Hounds, Peggy Rusk-Smith, daughter of the former Secretary of Treasury, Dean Rusk.



Dixon the man did not let race stop him from showing; nor will age stop him. He is still looking for one more horse to buy and one more rider to turn out. He also buys and sells horses for clients. Dixon now 94 as of March 22, 2007, never tires of the business that made him and his protégés champions before their time.