

Posted on Thu, Sep. 06, 2007

Legendary farrier shod 5 Derby winners dies

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Even the most casual of Kentucky Derby fans were affected by the work of Jackie Thompson.

Most racing fans might not have realized it, but for many years they cheered for Derby horses that Mr. Thompson outfitted with shoes.

Born in Lexington on Nov. 2, 1926, Mr. Thompson was a renowned farrier who shod the winners of five Kentucky Derbys. He was 80 when he died Tuesday in Lexington after a long illness.

Mr. Thompson had enjoyed a wide reputation for skills that are integral to the sport of racing. Without perfectly crafted, properly fitted shoes, most horses would not be capable of running competitively on the track.

"He was the greatest -- as good as any blacksmith that ever lived," said Herb Stevens, a former racehorse trainer of more than 50 years who was a longtime client of Mr. Thompson's.

Stevens said that Mr. Thompson was so good at his craft because, "he just knew how to shoe a horse right. He'd fit the shoe to the horse instead of the horse to the shoe."

According to Mr. Thompson's wife, Lucille Sewell Thompson, the farrier worked up until last February, because "he just couldn't give it up. He loved it."

According to the farrier's family, he was the oldest working horseshoer in Lexington.

The five Kentucky Derby winners shod by Mr. Thompson were Dark Star (1953), Proud Clarion (1967), Dust Commander (1970), Gato Del Sol (1982), and Swale (1984). In 1992, he was inducted into the International Horseshoeing Hall of Fame at Churchill Downs.

He was well known throughout the Kentucky horse industry. Racehorse trainers at tracks from New Orleans to Chicago would have Mr. Thompson flown in for shoeing work.

"Some of the trainers would send for him because he could make shoes and tools that no other blacksmith could make," said his daughter Bridgett Rice.

Throughout his career, Mr. Thompson taught his craft to numerous others. He was concerned when he took on his first apprentice, who was white. This occurred during the segregated era. Mr. Thompson worried that his clients at Keeneland "might resent it." So, he checked with all his clients to make sure they wouldn't mind.

In 1989, the International Equine Podiatry Association recognized Mr. Thompson "for excellence in equine service and dedication as a journeyman farrier."

Numerous newspaper and magazine articles were written about Mr. Thompson. He was an authority at his craft who had come a long way from not knowing how he wanted to earn a living when he came out of the U.S. Army -- and World War II.

Someone suggested he try blacksmithing because he had exercised horses briefly during his youth, while growing up in Lexington close to the old Kentucky Association track at Fifth and Race Streets. His father, Leonard Thompson, had been a racehorse groom. Mr. Thompson apprenticed at blacksmithing under George Tompkins, who was a legend among farriers in Lexington.

When he started with Tompkins, Mr. Thompson was living in Richmond. He rode the Greyhound bus every day for the first four or five years of working with Tompkins, getting to Lexington early in the morning and working all day before returning on the bus to Richmond.

Before going into the Army, Mr. Thompson worked at a variety of jobs, including photography. Many nightclubs lined Deweese Street at that time, for Deweese was the center of Lexington's segregated neighborhood. Mr. Thompson once told how he took photos of people at tables in those clubs.

"Deweese Street was a city of its own," he once told the Herald-Leader. "They had a little bit of everything. ... It was very, very active. We'd go there and see every black person in Lexington come by sooner or later. Now you can't. Integration. They all moved out all over the city."

Visitation for Mr. Thompson will be from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday at Shiloh Baptist Church. Services will take place at 1 p.m. at the church, with burial to follow in Evergreen Memory Gardens.