

In search of saddlebred artifacts

Horse Park museum wants pre-1970 evidence of blacks in industry

By Merlene Davis

HERALD-LEADER COLUMNIST

Kim Skipton has a bur under her saddle, so to speak.

Skipton, curator and librarian for the American Saddlebred Museum, is calling in favors, snooping around Web sites and articles, and even calling me to find anyone with any connection to the many local black men who trained and/or groomed saddlebred horses.

“They tease me here that I get like a dog with a bone because I want to prove it and I want to find it and I want to know it. And I get so excited when I find one thing,” she said, laughing. “They say, ‘You need to calm down now.’”

The museum, on the grounds of the Kentucky Horse Park, is planning a yearlong exhibit, starting in February, featuring the black horsemen.

After scratching the surface of the search, there seem to have been a lot of them.

Bourbon County was the birthplace for many of the best saddlebreds. The breed is native to Kentucky, the result of crossing the thoroughbred Narragansett pacer and Morgan breeds.

Officers in the Civil War rode saddlebreds almost exclusively. Today, they are used in the show ring for dressage, as barrel racers, hunters, for cross country and show jumping, and as parade mounts.

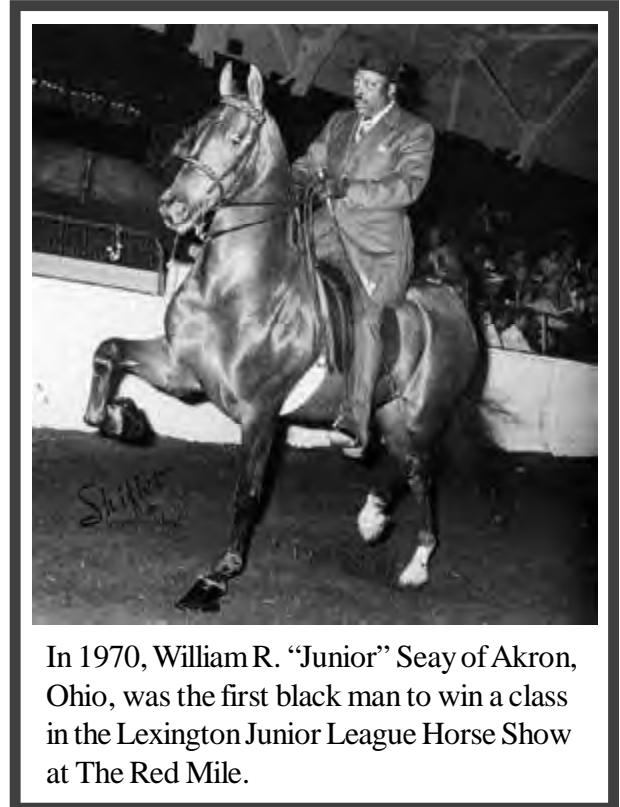
Skipton produced one small display case of pictures of black grooms and trainers during a recent exhibit, and it proved very popular.

That gave her the desire to find more memorabilia and make an entire exhibit of those forgotten men.

But she needs “things” in order to pull that off.” Pictures, riding apparel, tack and equipment, paintings, drawings, sculpture,” she said. “I don’t know what is out there. I’d like anything that they can say, ‘My father used this. He kept a notebook.’”

“I mean, I’m fishing here.”

Skipton will take the items on loan for the exhibit or as donations to the museum. The items she’s looking for should predate the 1970s.



In 1970, William R. “Junior” Seay of Akron, Ohio, was the first black man to win a class in the Lexington Junior League Horse Show at The Red Mile.

From the Civil War era to the 1950s, it was not that rare for black men to train saddlebreds. Some would get their start in the Bluegrass, then move to the more accepting venues up north, particularly Ohio, where they could train and show in competitions.

Here, they had to hand off the showing of the horses to white owners or trainers.

“I don’t know how many there were because so many of them were in the background,” Skipton said. “I do know so many of them migrated up north and went on to be very successful up there.”

North Middletown, in Bourbon County, produced a lot of black horsemen.

One was George “Dan” Brown, who learned his trade at home but left for Ohio where he broke colts and trained them all the way to the show ring. He died in Cleveland in 1980.

Another was Eddie Stivers, one of several siblings in the industry. He also moved to Ohio, where he trained horses for years as well as training winning rider Vickie Reiter. He died in Florida in 1997.

William Beauford “Preacher” Hall chose to stay in Kentucky, buying a farm and training saddlebreds in Bourbon County.

Tom Butler of North Middletown was named Ohio’s Most Distinguished Horseman among other awards for his training techniques. Butler’s son, who lives in Pennsylvania, also became a horseman.

Many others are listed, some with details, at www.blackhorsemen.com.

In 1970, William R. “Junior” Seay of Akron, Ohio, was the first black man to win a class at the Lexington Junior League Horse Show. He won with champion Stonewall’s Crescendo in the Fine Harness Stallions and Geldings Stake.

In 2004 at the Kentucky State Fair, Mike Spencer won the Open Five Gaited Mare Stake as trainer and rider of Spider Red.

“The crowd went berserk,” Skipton said. “He is well-liked. He is a good man.”

So, look around the house, around your parents’ garages and basements for anything a relative might have used in the saddlebred industry.

We know blacks were integrally involved. Skipton just needs your help to show it.

Call her at (859) 259-2746, Ext. 312, if you can help.

Reach Merlene Davis at (859) 231-3218 or 1-800-950-6397, Ext. 3218, or mdavis1@herald-leader.com.



George "Dan" Brown, who was born in Bourbon County, honed his craft there and at Dixiana Farm in Lexington before moving to Ohio, where opportunities for black horsemen were greater.