

Black Horse Racing in Orange

“A Race Track in Orange with Black Ownership,” author unknown (a handwritten article found on file at the Orange County Historical Society—a primary source document):

“Mr. Lewis Ellis, a Black farmer, owned a 200 acre farm a short distance from the Town of Orange just off Monrovia Road. I was told that Mr. Ellis and other Blacks who were interested in fine horses organized a racing club.

“They built a flat oval track on his property-just prior to World War I. There was a grandstand and a dance hall.

“The track had a racing course and an area for jumping.

“There were five days of racing, the program consisted of five racings each afternoon. One day was set aside for mule races.

“Each day closed with a nightly dance. The big popular Black bands came from all over the country to furnish the music.

“Mr. Lewis Ellis passed, and there were his two sons, Marshall and Gus, who took over full operation of the track.

“After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Defense Department closed down all outdoor night activities or what is known as blackouts and that was the end of the Black racing track, it never opened again.

“Many of the Black men in Orange County had some well-bred thoroughbreds. Many Blacks were stable men, trainers and handlers of the thoroughbreds from Virginia, Kentucky, and Maryland. Horses were brought in from all over.

“Marshall and Gus Ellis were par excellence trainers of racers and jumpers.”

“Keeping track of horse show history”¹

By Hannah Wever, writer for the *Orange County Review*:

“In bygone days, news of winning a class at the Orange Horse Show was the stuff of regional and even national news, and exhibitors and spectators hailed from far-off cities and states to attend local events. Horses are still everywhere, and equine sporting events still take place all over Orange County.

“Nowadays, the horses and riders who compete and earn championship honors at Orange County horse shows don’t make the front page news any more, and shows and races don’t draw capacity crowds, dressed to the nines like they used to.

“Spectators these days are mostly proud grandparents armed with a camcorder, horse-crazy teens helping their barn buddies at the show ring ingate and bored siblings of show riders just biding their time. But in the days long before television and text messaging, when horses in general were a more integral part of county life, the Orange Horse Show brought folks out dressed in finery: top hats and tails, gloves and spats, and eager to see the area’s best compete for ribbons and silver cups.

“For the most part, the owners and riders in the old Orange Horse Show were members of the county’s elite. Each year since the show’s inception around the 1900s, these equestrians proudly displayed their best horses and rode for honors against fierce competitors from surrounding counties and states. The show was held for a time at the location in Orange where C.R. Butler now stands.² The show was later held at the Virginia Metal Industries property on Old Gordonsville Road.

“The annual Orange Horse Show, sponsored by the Orange Horse Show and Racing Association, was the white community’s equestrian competition and social event of the season. The show was sanctioned by a number of national and state governing bodies, including the American Horse Shows Association and the Virginia Horse Shows Association. It was one of a circuit of highly competitive shows, along with similar events held in Albemarle, Charlottesville and Warrenton.

“Each year, the Orange Horse Show grandstands were packed with spectators who flocked to Orange from all over Virginia—and beyond—to watch racing, draft horse, pony and harness classes as well as a variety of hunters, jumpers and in-hand breeding classes.

¹ Wever, Hannah. “Keeping track of horse show history.: *Orange County Review*, July 17, 2008, 1, A-11.

² Today that would be the site of Gibson Rentals.

“The animals that competed at the Orange Horse Show represented the finest in the area, and were owned by the top horsemen and riders in Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D.C. Local exhibitors included members of the county’s landed gentry and social elite.

“Results of the Orange Horse Show were front page news in the *Orange Review*; prizes were extravagant and winners were regarded as local heroes.

“A 1928 edition of the local paper billed the show on the front page as ‘Two days of Thrills,’ with ‘Prominent Exhibitors among the Entries.’ After the horse show closed, coverage of the show, ‘a spectacular horsemanship exhibit,’ was provided by the Richmond *Times Dispatch*, among other newspapers. The names of winning owners and horse show officials read like a Who’s Who of Mid-Atlantic upper class.

“According to Orange’s Duff Green, (who knows just about everything about 20th century Orange County history and can produce a relevant file folder full of sepia-toned photos to prove it), the once grand Orange Horse Show had dwindled in size and importance as a social event by the 1940s.

“In fact, members of Green’s family held a number of important positions as horse show officials over the years, and served on the Orange Horse Show board.

“But in the horse show’s halcyon days, not everyone was able to participate as an exhibitor, rub elbows with Orange’s high society, place friendly wagers on winners, or even sit in the grandstands.

“In those days of racial segregation, the annual Orange Horse Show left a segment of county society without a venue in which to exhibit their own well-bred and highly trained horses. African American community members were excluded from much of the competition and festivities at the horse show and races, regardless of their talent or level of accomplishment as horsemen.

“While members of the white community were organizing their horse show each year, big-name trainers and riders from the county’s African American community collaborated to form their own top-level showing and racing competitions.

“Among those dedicated African American horsemen were Lewis Ellis, Andrew Maples, Sr., and Benjamin Bowler. These gentlemen formed the corporation which produced the annual Black horse show and frequently served as officials during the event.

“Within Orange County’s African American community were legendary horsemen, with impeccable taste in horseflesh and sophisticated skill as horse breeders and handlers, jockeys and exhibitors.

“Ellis, Maples and Bowler organized the annual Orange [Black] Horse Show, which soon earned a reputation as a top level competition with well-bred animals handled and ridden by expert horse trainers, breeders and riders. The Orange [Black] Horse Show grew to become a decades-long institution and attracted its own following of sophisticated society and expert exhibitions from all over the East Coast.

“According to a 1938 *Orange Review*, Bowler extended a personal invitation to ‘pugilistic champion’ Joe Louis. ‘We would be pleased to have you with us this year and to exhibit some of your horses,’ Bowler wrote.

“The Orange [Black] Horse Show attracted crowds and exhibitors from as far away as Kentucky and New York, and featured some of the highest levels of competition of the day. Festivities during the competition included a number of parties, dances and feasting while attendees—both black and white—were entertained by illustrious musical legends of the day.

“In addition to horse shows, the African American community enjoyed a vibrant racing season each year.

“Around the turn of the last century, Ellis formed a horse racing empire and held well-attended racing seasons at the equestrian complex he built on his 200 acre farm off Monrovia Road. The property featured a flat track and jump course, a grandstand, and dance hall.

“Ellis’ racing season was comprised of five days of flat, jump and harness racing and one day each season was set aside just for mule races. Following the last race on each day of the season, popular musical acts started playing and the dance floors filled with revelers.

“After Ellis’ death, his sons Marshall and Gus took over the farm and the track, and continued operating the popular sporting events and festivities their father had instituted as an annual tradition. But when Pearl Harbor was attacked in 1941, the United States Department of Defense shut down large-scale activities across the county; the Ellis family’s track was closed.

“The racetrack never reopened.”