

Tom Bass

Horse Trainer and Founder of the American Royal Horse Show 1859-1934

by Kimberly R. Riley

Credited as a founder of the American Royal Horse Show, Tom Bass was lauded for his showmanship skills. For a half century, Bass trained thousands of horses to prance, bow, curtsy, dance, do the cakewalk, and dozens of other tricks.

Bass was born a slave in 1859 in Columbia, Missouri. He moved to Mexico, Missouri, after the Civil War, where he found work as a stable boy. Bass eventually became a trainer and established a reputation for training even the most wild, violent horses.

A true lover of horses, Bass never beat horses and rarely raised his voice. He even invented (but refused to patent) a special bit that is still in use today to ease the pain that horses endure during training.

Bass moved to Kansas City in 1893 where he trained and rode some of the world's most famous horses. A suggestion made by Bass in 1894 led to the formation of Kansas City's first horse show, the American Royal. As a member of the fire department advisory committee on horses, he suggested sponsoring a horse show to raise funds to send Fire Chief George C. Hale to Europe to study types of fire horses.

In his three years in Kansas City, he trained many of the city's wealthiest citizens, including Loula Long Combs. While in Kansas City, Bass also received an invitation by Queen Victoria in 1897 to attend London's diamond jubilee with his famous horse, Miss Rex. He declined the invitation due to his fear of traveling across the ocean.

Bass performed before U.S. Presidents Coolidge, Cleveland, McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, and Taft. He was also honored by Queen Marie of Rumania at the St. Louis Horse Show. During his career, he won competitions at every horse show in the country, earned more than 2,000 blue ribbons, and won championships at two world's fairs. For many years, he was the only African American to exhibit at the American Royal Horse Show, where audiences remembered him as the high-hatted rider of Belle Beach, his most



famous mare. Bass' grave marker in Mexico, Missouri, displays a picture of him riding Belle.

Sources

The Kansas City Star, 20 Nov. 1934; 17 May 1975.

The Kansas City Star, 14 Nov. 1998, B1, B2.

The Kansas City Times, 10 Aug. 1949.

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