

Stable Views--Voices and Stories from the Thoroughbred Racetrack
Archie Green Fellows Project, 2012-2013
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Oran Trahan interview, 2012-10-24 : interview conducted by Ellen E. McHale

INTERVIEW LOG

00 Oran Trahan introduces himself. He talks about his being Cajun and about his being from Lafayette Parish.

00:50 He talks about horses being a strong part of life in that part of Louisiana. He talks about the rural nature of Louisiana and how they had to have horses in order to survive. On weekends, the horses were used for racing. He talks about match races on the weekends being part of the culture. They would race on the public road that was a dirt road. He says that everyone is fascinated with horses.

“Racing is so much of the culture here. Oh yeah. Horses are so big. And not only racehorses, but horses in Louisiana are big, you know.

I don't know why. Louisiana people are basically rural. The people who settled Louisiana, even North Louisiana, They were farmers. And I guess that probably has a connection. Because, if you were rural a hundred years ago, fifty years ago, you had to have horses and mules to survive. I know, in my case, I remember vaguely and I've heard so many stories. My dad had horses. He was a farmer. He had horses and mules and on weekend, the horses were used for racing. They would “match them. And this was part of the culture and it was BIG. People didn't have much to do other than that. But this was part of our culture, I remember my dad saying, and I remember vaguely." The public road going for the ...it was a public road, but it was a dirt road, that's how things were. And there was very little traffic, sixty years ago. So they fenced part of the public road to have their races. I guess they had a lot fun. But it was just part of our culture. We grew up that way....”

2:33 Talks about horses being like pets and their gentle nature. He says they don't have time for affection. “The dollar runs the show.”

2:54 He only has 2 horses now as he is semi-retired. “I get up at 10 to four in the morning. I've been doing that for years and years and years. It's a way of life and I need to keep busy so I'll always be a part of this.”

3:17 He talks about galloping horses before school in the morning. He says, “Before school, I had to gallop horses. Maybe after school, I had to gallop horses. It was always horses, horses, horses.” After school, he went into the military and when he came out, he went back to the horses.

3:37 “It’s a hard life but it’s a fascinating business. It’s a challenging business. If that’s the right word. If you’re in the racing business, after a while the backside becomes your family. It becomes your friend. You know. That’s the way it is. The people we associate with are probably connected with the horse racing. It’s unique....”

4:32 He talks about the Delahoose’s being a family that is involved entirely in racing. He talks about how the father and grandfather were involved. “It’s traditional. If you get involved with horses, you start tagging along with your dad at the barn. Next thing you know, you’re doing it and you become part of it. That’s the way it is, you know. But it’s a hard business. It’s a hard way to live. You’re 24-and-seven. You have to deal with people. It’s a hard way to go. It’s not for a family. That’s what I’m saying. Because you’re away from home so much. I experienced that. I have two daughters. You’re away from home so much. It’s hard on a family. But we’re doing it....”

5:59 “I’ve been doing this on a professional level over forty years. I started in the late 60s and I made a living out of it. I did not get rich, but I made a living. I was able to support my family, send my two daughters to college, you know. And I’m still doing it, you know, but I’m satisfied. I stayed home. Ran mostly here and some in Texas some in Arkansas, but I stayed here. I didn’t venture out somewhere’s else, Kentucky or Florida - places like that. But you need to do that if you’re really going to do BIG in this business. You take the big guys in this business ...Pletcher and those people, they’re always on the run. They’re always on the run. The horses own you. They OWN you. You’re always traveling for a horse and that’s the way it is. It’s very, very demanding. It can be enjoyable, for the sake of winning a race. Or “taking a picture,” we say. That’s the most joyful time you’ll have – at that time. "Taking a picture." And it doesn’t matter if it’s a \$5000 claimer or a handicapped race. You get a lot of joy there. All your work, your planning, sort of comes together. But you work for it..."

7:40 He talks about racing in Louisiana as a big industry providing work. There are four racetracks with two running at one time. There are a lot of spin off jobs – he talks about support jobs and housing. “Very few people get rich doing that but it does touch a lot of people.”

8:30 “This is different...You compare this state to say, Kentucky or New York. Well, these people have more money to spend on racing. they’ve already established. And Kentucky is known to be the place where your best horses are raised. Well, for a lot of reasons. And you

compare this state. These other state's established. It's supported more by big money people. Louisiana is not like that. Most of your racing in Louisiana, most of your horses, are owned by working people. People with not a lot of, lot of money. It makes for a different game, you know. People out of New York or Kentucky, they have more capital available. They can buy bigger horses, better horses. And they're able to do the most for these horses. Over here, like I said, it's different. You don't have the capital. But I think people down here have more fun than people in New York. Because people enjoy this. They enjoy it. They have jobs and they do it as a hobby. Most of them do. They have more fun. I know that...."

10:22 "What makes a good trainer is a man who is willing to get up early in the morning, and be here early in the morning, and willing to stay here as long as he has to. Because it's a very detailed type of work. There's a lot of things you can do to help a horse. And a horse is demanding. You need to take care of him, you know. You can't just pay lip service. If you're going to train, you have to work at it, and that means long, long hours. And in this business here, you learn all the time. You learn all the time. You rub elbows with people who have different ideas- good ideas..."

11:20 He talks about trainers: "You have some people who are just--like anything else--better at it than other people. You have people who came up and they're just good at it. They are just good at it. They're born for it, and it makes a difference. If you're not willing to spend the time, you're not doing your job. You've got to be willing to be here and do your best. And after you've trained for forty, fifty years, you realize, 'Hey, I've learned quite a bit in the last forty, fifty years...'"

12:10 He talks about getting out of the military in 1962. He moved to New Orleans and worked in the supply business and when he got married, he went back into the horse business. At one time, he was in the breeding business. "This past winter was the first time since 1967, since I've been doing it on a professional level. The first time we had just a few horses in training and they were tired, sore, so I brought them to -- I have a small farm and we rested them in the winter. And this was the first time in my life that I've been doing this--that I'd get up in the morning and I had nothing to do. It was a terrible feeling. After about sixty days, I got back in to it. It's a way of life."

13:36 He talks about his daughters. He and his wife kept them away from the track as much as they could and they got a good education. They wanted them to be well educated. He remembers in the 1970s, when he went with a herd of horses, and his daughters were 6 and 7 years old and they went to Louisiana Downs and brought the kids for the winter and they went to school there. They decided it was not a way to raise a family. He has one daughter who is a band director. They directed her away from racing. "Racing has some very sad parts to it. You have people who get in there and they neglect their education. You have a lot of drop outs back here. People that

don't finish school. You take those jockeys, for instance. A lot of these jockeys are well off. They make a lot of money. But they most of them have not finished high school. If something happens, they don't know anything else. And that describes pretty much the horse population. For a lot of people, that's all they know. They're good at it, but that's all they know. And if something happens...I guess that's life.

But you have a lot of good people here. Hard working people. Really, a lot of them don't want to do anything else. They 'd rather be with these horses at 4:30, 5:00 o'clock in the morning until midnight, 1:00. We do a lot of night racing here in Louisiana, which means you're going to be up until.. You're going to do two days of work in one. It's a hardship, a real hardship..."

16:54 The racing in New Orleans are during the day. Delta Downs is at night. "Day time racing is easier. It's easier. It becomes part of your job..." He says that he prefers daytime racing. He talks about the different racetracks in Louisiana. They do Friday night racing at Fairgrounds in New Orleans. "Racing in this country, in this state, is really struggling, you know. It's a slow game. Casinos have more or less invaded this country. And people who are looking for action are more likely to go to a casino than they will a racetrack. It's just hard to get more people involved in racing because it is a slow game. We live a fast life. American culture has made fast food a very, very profitable business because we don't have time to wait. We've to eat and drink our coffee in according with the work. And that's how people live."

18:53 If you're a real racing fan, you love horses, you love to bet them. You'll get a Racing Form and you learn about horses. You study about horses. You get involved. You get involved. The next thing you know, that's what you want to do. Because racing has to kind of grow on you. If you're a newcomer... To a newcomer, who has never been to a racetrack and he goes to a racetrack. He might be in town for business or something, and he has nothing else to do at night, so he goes to the races. He's never been to the races. He walks in to the grandstand. He'll buy a Racing Form or a program (which he probably doesn't know how to read). And then he'll look at the tote board that flashes the odds and he's completely confused.

Now, unless this guy, or girl, lucked out and cashed a bet, chances are they're not coming back. Because it's a confusing business and you have to learn it. It's not like going to the ball park or a football game and sit down and just, and just... And you have this time in between racing, which is for a person doing some handicapping. He needs the time to handicap the next race. But for the regular guy or girl just going there to be entertained - it gets boring. You're sitting there for twenty five minutes. What do I do? How much beer can I drink? [laughs] You've got to be part of the culture..."

20:37 He talks about the future of racing and slot machines: "I can see, right now, we are being...Racing is being supplemented by (and some people don't want to hear the word), but it's being supplemented by slot machines. What the slot machine has done in this state: It has

rescued a dying industry--a big industry. Without the slots, you'd probably have three or four tracks that would have gone belly-up.

And this has happened all over the country. Slot machines are rescuing racing. And it's not a good thing. It's a band-aid approach. It's not bringing any more people into racing. It's bringing more people to the slots. And one of these days, slots are going to wear out. Something's going to happen. It's happening now. Your politician sees all of this money and they want a balanced budget.

I look – probably not in my lifetime – but I can see where racing will go back to being what it was many years ago: the sport of kings only for people who can afford it. And you have less racing than you have now. Because people are not coming to this game. And without the slots--first-wise, you don't have the money you need to be running for...to pay expenses. This looks good! We're happy right now. But it's not going to last. It's going to eventually just play out in some fashion. And the big thing that worries me is the politicians all over the country. They're trying to balance budgets. They see all this money. You see this state here runs for about 90 million dollars a year. Most of it's slot machines! That's a lot of money.

We, so far in Louisiana, our elected people have treated us well. If we want something, they're with us. They'll work with us. And that's fine, but it won't last forever. You read of a place like Pennsylvania. They've already dipped in and took some of the (when I say "they," I'm talking about the politicians) to balance their budget--took some of their purse money. New York is doing tremendously well, right now, with slots. But they're looking at all that money and it will not last. New York, all of a sudden, sprung up. People are going to New York to breed horses, to race. Which is great. People see all that money.

Politicians have to do their job. They do what they need to do to survive. And to most of them, the industry doesn't mean that much. But here in Louisiana, it's got this industry going again. It's big in Louisiana. You've got a lot of people breeding horses now. But it's not going to last. It's going to take awhile. You can write that down. I know what I'm talking about. But we're having fun in the meantime. You have to run for big money, because this game is expensive. Terribly expensive. And for the last four or five years, everything's gone up. Everything. Everything. It's an expensive business. So, owners foot the bill, but they need have to have a source of money, and down here it's the purse money. Purse structure. It means more here, for the reason I was trying to explain a while ago. Because you don't have the coffers that New York, Kentucky has. You have some people in this business – I'll mention the Phipps from New York – These people have been in there for years and years and they're extremely wealthy people. Blue bloods. And these are the kind of people that supports racing. More so than here. We don't have that here. Mostly working people who do it as a part time thing.”

25:53 End of Interview.