

Eulogy for Mr. Russell

Friday, December 28, 2012, Stevenson, Alabama

We are here today to celebrate the life of our dear friend Walter Russell. To begin with, Walter was as “kind and gentle a soul” as I’ve ever met. I think he was liked by nearly everybody he encountered, from the most exalted horse owner or academician, to the counter-man or waitress at his regular breakfast stop or the Dairy Queen. My wife says that he could engage a conversation it seemed about anything with anybody. An observation echoed by other friends this week. His circle of friends was both diverse and delightful. Doug Weaver’s story of his encounter on Sunday....

Any encounter with Mr. Russell was memorable. I’m sure all of us here can recall the first time we met him, ... or worked with him, ... or sadly, the last time we shared a conversation. Although I suspect the sharing “part” wasn’t necessarily equitable -- he would invariably hold the preponderance of a dialogue. To say that he was a master story teller (the Irish say a *shanachie*) is to state the obvious to all who shared any time with him. He exemplified the finest tradition of that Southern art form, often written but best expressed and **enjoyed** orally. A casual conversation or phone call with Walter was a gift that required some investment in time. But lucky me: I made the time usually and most of his stories were about varied subjects and people, current and past, that fascinated me for almost four decades.

As most of you know, Walter Sanders Russell Jr was the son of Evelyn & Sanders Russell (a Hall-of-Fame horseman himself, both here in Alabama and in Goshen and winner of the Hambletonian Stake), born here in Stevenson on the Russell farm and was never far from those roots throughout his life. He was around the family stable from an early age, their business racing harness horses. He spent his early summers, at the small three-day fair meetings in Ohio and Indiana and at the year-end Grand Circuit at Lexington during the 1930s. He was literally a witness to harness racing’s grassroots. I’m from Ohio; Walter, and his brother Henry, would regale me at dinner some nights with their precise recollections of small town eateries in towns such as Wapakoneta, or Xenia, or Urbana. Their interests in those years – as all through their lives -- went far beyond horses. Particularly they remembered the village sweet shops in detail that would make your mouth water. I’d say a sweet tooth was weakness, but both brothers had elevated that to a well-studied discipline. Walter following that early work, never met a “sweetie” or, for that matter a salt shaker or tab of butter he didn’t like. If you had the good fortune of dining with him, you can attest to that.

Until his mid twenties Walter blended academics in the off-season with working for the Russell Stable at the new pari-mutuel race meetings after the war. The family stable raced at the highest level in those years in the Northeast. He shared with me that some of his finest memories were seeing let alone personally training some of the greatest horses of the era, as well as knowing legendary horsemen and women of the sport from those times. Incidentally, his grandfather I.P. Russell was one of the horsemen that were called by E. Roland Harriman to Indianapolis in 1939 for a summit meeting which established the U.S. Trotting Association; his father was a USTA director for many years. I suspect Walter was also exposed to the issues of the sport from an early age.

His scholastic career, combining music and humanities, was admirable (and enviable to an educational underachiever like myself) to say the least, both in the classroom and at the lectern. As I said, it worked well complimenting the racing season. Study at, at least, five institutions; degrees from four and teaching positions in another three. His love for academics, especially literature and teaching, was carried by him throughout his entire life. His literacy and vocabulary were wonderful, but more so his facility never to talk down to anyone. His circle of friends from academia and later Atlanta took his far beyond the world of the trotter, but he effortlessly slipped from one sphere to the other and back

again over the years. However his extended academic pursuit in retrospect, at least from my viewpoint, was what would be considered a leisurely “Walterly” pace and probably with cause. I once asked him how his three months or so at Oxford were spent and he replied “playing tennis.”

Walter never wanted to be a harness driver like his father and grandfather, although he could have been a fine horse trainer. He modestly was quoted as saying, “I once thought if I had much title to excellence in this sport, it would have been as a groom.” Instead his mark was made as an official, a judge. Walter Gibbons, who, recognizing his potential took him to Bay State Raceway in 1955 where he installed him in the judges’ stand, long before his experience warranted, according to Mr. Russell, or for that matter, before the aforementioned U.S. Trotting Association would license him as a judge. He was there for five years, rising almost immediately rising to presiding judge after a year or so to satisfy the USTA. Over the next forty years, by Walter’s recollection, he had worked in the judges’ stand at 16 different tracks in eleven jurisdictions. It is noteworthy who it was that hired him for many of those assignments. Often as not, it was one of the great men of the industry, almost all Hall-of-Famers, who recognized the qualities that Walter brought to the stand. Their endorsement about his effectiveness and the integrity of his officiating speaks volumes. Certainly more than mine!

I think most horsemen rated him highly as a judge, and liked him, and liked racing under him. One night at the horse sale in Lexington I witnessed a group of a half dozen or more of the most prominent drivers in the sport gathered around Walter like it was a reunion. He was a close to celebrity as any official that I know of in such a setting. Whether at Lexington or at the Hambletonian in recent years, the “Judge” always drew a crowd of horsemen. Because of Walter’s background on the backstretch, he had a great rapport with horsemen and owners. Up until Walter’s sixties, he would often be found on slow mornings at the training tracks, where he rode behind colts from many different stables, large and small. He was truly a member of the horsemen’s community at those tracks. However that didn’t mean he would hesitate to discipline the same drivers or trainers for infractions on the track. Walter didn’t rule with an iron hand, but could be more “diplomatic,” in the words of one of the sport’s best drivers. He knew the rule book and objectively enforced it. He knew how racing should be conducted on the racetrack and maintained it as such. His enforcement was no-nonsense, but often was mitigated with such common sense that the horsemen respected it. No one was immune to answering for an infraction, including mightiest, but they always respected him, his manner and his decisions.

He also has the great legacy of seeing young associates go on to success such as “Gallagher & Sheen.” I don’t mean the vaudevillians from the Ed Sullivan show. Hugh Gallagher is now the state steward in Delaware; Kevin Sheen is chief Thoroughbred steward at Gulfstream Park. Both were associate judges with Mr. Russell in Kentucky and Florida when I first met them. Walter claims at least a dozen such successes that he has mentored, an accomplishment for which, at the time of his Hall of Fame induction, he was most proud.

I hope I’m on his list. I first worked with him at the Meadows when I was the Assistant Racing Secretary, then Racing Secretary and still remember his straight forward but seemingly easy going approach to racing. I have also called upon him for his counsel numerous times in the past thirty years. So have racing commissions throughout the industry. Walter, in retirement, had even been called upon by even the FBI to examine testimony or other evidence.

A few years ago I received a call from a writer from one of the major New York City papers, who asked why Walter was qualified for the Hall of Fame. I sent her an e-mail outlining the above credits and closed by saying, “**I haven’t mentioned his intellect, his clarity of reason, his observations & grasp of**

detail... and his wit. As one former associate put it, "**harness racing with Walter was fun!**" Sitting with him [during his annual trip to the Lexington for the Grand Circuit,] he still can watch a race, catching incidents of questionable driving or a bad gait on horses, better than about anyone I know... and without binoculars. He was remarkable! **It's the combination of the above and longevity of his experience presiding over some of the most important races of our sport that make him unique and deserving of his election to the Hall of Fame of the Trotter in Goshen, N.Y."**

He wasn't a perfect man. Among his few vices was his apparent inability to pass a piano in either a public place, or in his own home, without sitting down to play spontaneously anything from show standards to a piece of a classical concerto. Long after the band had left, Walter could entertain friends and passer-bys in a late night piano bar or as he did at our wedding. One of his friends said police tape wouldn't stop him, although I personally never saw this at the scene of a crime.

As I said earlier, all of us have our favorite moment with Walter. Of my many, the one I retell the most is:

Walter, my wife Sue and I were coming out of the Meadowlands Racetrack after the Hambletonian some years back and Walter was telling Sue a story to which he uncharacteristically interjected, "Stop me Sue if you've heard this before." He then paused, thinking about what he said, turned to me and offered, "Tom, I think you've heard all my stories. I no longer see any point in us remaining friends!

Walter, I hope I haven't yet heard all your stories. I'd like to think we'll share some more at some point in time. Until that happy reunion, Rest In Peace my dear friend.