

## 11. George Washington Dennis and Florence Arbuckle

By

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Grandad and Mammy Dennis are the oldest relatives I remember, and my direct memories of them are sometimes foggy. Mammy died in 1950 at the age of 70 from complications of a broken hip. She spent the last months of her life bedridden in Seabay and L E Jackson's house near the cemetery, by then expanded to include a large kitchen, second bedroom, bathroom, back porch, and partial basement. The last memory I have of Mammy is a frail, very slim old lady lying in the big bed in the front bedroom. I have a few mementoes that belonged to her, including her "granny" glasses and an old leather coin purse. The only thing in her handwriting that I have is a note she must have left on the door for someone that reads, "Down in the garden gathering Greens. Florence." This is written on a May 15, 1943 USDOA Farm Security Administration 2-page circular from Greenville, Kentucky that is addressed to her.

Mom told me of a conversation she once overheard between Mammy and Grandad during which he said, "Florence, don't you wish we could live to see Gary grown?" To which Mammy replied, "What's the matter with you, George? You know we won't live that long." Mammy died when I was not quite seven years old.

Grandad, on the other hand, lived until December 10, 1963, about 3 months after my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday. He was 88 years old when he died less than 3 weeks after President Kennedy was assassinated. Indeed, he did live to see me grown and in college at Indiana University in Bloomington. One of the great regrets of my life is that I did not get to attend his funeral.

Grandad spent the latter years of his life in various places in Central City, but he never lived with his daughter, Aunt Seabay. At one time he stayed with his nephew, Willie G. Dennis (Newton Dennis's son) and his wife, Willie May, near the fairgrounds in Central City. Most of the latter years of his life were spent in the home of his son and daughter-in-law, Zibe and Daph Dennis, where for a time also lived Aunt Daph's mother, Ursula Ralph.

Aunt Daph took very good care of Grandad, and I remember the good-natured bantering between them when I visited. This was in a January 2, 1964 letter that my maternal grandmother, Mamaw Corrine Bolton, wrote to her sister Aunt Seabay shortly after Grandad's death:

I loved papa too if I didn't get to see him or be with him like the rest of you. Tell Daphnia I will never forget how good she has been to papa and Zibe too. He loved Daphnia. He told me when I was down there how good she was to him. You remember I kept Mr. Bolton 3 years after Tab died.

Grandad Dennis was well respected for his work ethic in that part of Kentucky. For years he ran a dairy and they delivered milk to people in the area via horse and wagon. It was Uncle Zibe who did the deliveries, and one of the family stories involves a drinking problem that he had at the time. I was told that sometimes on the return trips, Uncle Zibe would pass out, but the horse knew the way home and would always get him there safely.

It was many years before Uncle Zibe overcame his drinking problem, and it took a near tragedy to make him face it. As I recall, it was around the 4<sup>th</sup> of July one year in the early 1950s on a very hot day. Uncle Zibe was found severely beaten at the fairgrounds in the back seat of a car with the windows rolled up. He had a basket over his head, and he had almost died from heat exhaustion by the time he was found. I was in Central City around the time this happened, and Seabay took me to visit him in the hospital. I still have the letter I sent to Mom from Central City in which I childishly wrote, "Uncle Zibe is better. Every time I go over there Linda Sue worries me to death." Mom told me many years later that Uncle Zibe got drunk one more time shortly after that and never touched liquor again.

George Dennis was also a drinker and once while inebriated, Mom said he threw a plate at Mammy at the dinner table. It was Uncle Zibe who put a stop to that, saying "Old Man, that's enough of that!" To her knowledge, such an incident was never repeated.

Grandad told me a story involving the half pint of whiskey that he carried with him to Churchill Downs in Louisville one year and took with him to Whirlaway's stable before the race.

"Where do you think you're going, old man?" a guard said in a warning tone.

"Aye, God, I'm goin' in there to see Whirlaway."

"And just how do you think you're going to get through that gate?"

"Aye, God, I'm gonna go over it, if you don't open the damned thing!"

For years he had joined men of his mettle once a year in Louisville to watch the Kentucky Derby. And this year's race featured the greatest horse of all, Whirlaway. He must not just be seen for a few seconds at a distance of a hundred feet in one lunging blur during the race. He must be viewed from every angle at arm's length—the mane, the famous long tail, every inch must be surveyed and committed to memory.

"Let that old man in, John. I know him. How you doin', Uncle George?" said a man with some authority who was an acquaintance.

"Tolerable. Tolerable. Aye, God, which one of them stalls is Whirlaway in?"

"Come on in with me. I'll show him to you."

Imagine his luck when not only the horse, but also the fabled trainer, Ben Jones, was in the barn. Grandad pulled out his half-pint of whiskey and offered Mr. Jones a drink. Later, he said he was embarrassed and always regretted it, when the trainer responded that he didn't drink.

Where I heard another story about Grandad's mettle, I don't remember, but probably it was from Mom. He was helping someone put a wagon wheel on a wagon. His part in this task was to hold the wagon up while the other person worked the wheel onto the axle. They encountered some difficulty and the work took longer than it should have. When the task was finished, Grandad's hands were both bleeding, cut from the sharp place that he was holding the wagon. He wouldn't let go until the job was done.

Grandad himself told me about needing a loan to buy some equipment or seed one year. He went to Tobe (?) Gish to ask for help. Mr. Gish, I believe, was one of the richest men in those parts. He took out a blank check and signed it, telling "Uncle George" as he was known by all in Central City, to take it to the bank and get whatever amount he needed. Grandad then went to the bank and asked the banker if

he could get a hundred dollars with the check. The banker replied, "Uncle George, with that signature on the check, you can have all the money in the bank!"

It was Grandad who took me for my first haircut when I was about 15 months old. Mom's entry in my baby book indicated Ernest Brown cut it, but she always said it took 3 men to hold me down. Grandad also took me to the carnival at Central City's fairgrounds at a tender age. I remember that they had a lion in a cage, and I could not believe how large it was. For another experience at the carnival, Grandad sneaked me into a "hootchy-kootchy" show by concealing me under his overcoat. Mammy was not pleased when I told her that I saw some women taking their clothes off.

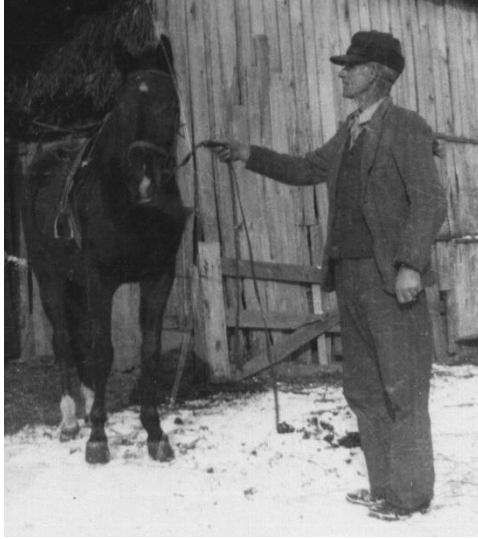
How true this next story is, I do not know, but I would not bet against it. Mom said that Grandad's cure for a lot of things, from cuts to sore throats was kerosene! Like the father in *A Big Fat Greek Wedding* who thought Windex was the cure-all, Grandad apparently had great faith in kerosene. Another old folk remedy that Mom talked about was the Asphidity bag, but I don't recall experiencing that. Apparently it was a foul-smelling bag that you hung around your neck to ward off various ailments. (1)

Grandad chewed tobacco, as did his sons Uncle Jack and Uncle Zibe. I saw him use both the twisted loose-leaf and the plug types of tobacco, but he seemed to favor the loose-leaf. It was always strange to see the coffee cans next to chairs in the spotless homes of Aunt Daph and Aunt Elizabeth, the repositories for their husbands' tobacco-soaked spit.

Another love of Grandad was sorghum molasses, and I remember accompanying him and some friends to buy some at a country store in a small town not far from Central City. The proprietor of the store offered each of us a wooden spoon to get a taste from the gallon jar of molasses. Grandad stuck his spoon in first, nodded his head in approval after tasting it, and stuck the same spoon into the jar for one of his friends to try, much to the consternation of the store owner. All turned out well, however, when we bought the jar of molasses.

A favorite past-time of old men of Grandad's generation was swapping pocket knives and using those knives to whittle various wooden objects. I still have a small shucker Grandad made for me to shuck corn and a bullwhip whose handle he carved. (He probably braided the leather whip, too.) Sharon Bishop and I used to have contests to see who could snap a piece of paper off a bush with deadeye accuracy. I think she usually won.

Let's end this portrait of Grandad Dennis with a story that further illustrates his love for racehorses. For a while, he had at least part interest in a race horse, Sandy Bottom, shown below. Nothing captures Grandad's passion for horse racing better than a story that appeared in a local Muhlenberg County newspaper in 1969, so I've reproduced it for this chapter.



George Dennis and Sandy Bottom

#### NOTES

1. "Asphidity Bags: A Student's Guide to Ethnocentric Healthcare."  
[https://www.samuelmerritt.edu/president/news\\_room/apr\\_2012/asphidity-bags-students-guide-ethnocentric-healthcare](https://www.samuelmerritt.edu/president/news_room/apr_2012/asphidity-bags-students-guide-ethnocentric-healthcare) (accessed 7/22/2018) [also spelled "asafetida"; Mom actually pronounced it "asaFITidy".]

For the most recent version of this chapter, see: <https://hoosierpewter.com/WBS/WBS-0011.pdf>

# Central City's Most Famous Race Horse Won First at Age 17

BY THE OLD TIMER

This isn't old time stuff, but it's worth repeating. Genial Bill Crabtree and until Friday night's Jan. 10 meeting of the Muhlenberg County Board of Education, was chairman of the board, commenting on the establishment's take over in the scholastic area, compared himself to the Englishman who was the subject of a tale sometimes told by the late Thomas A. Isaacs of Drakesboro, (himself an Englishman).

Bill said that well-wishers, since his defeat for re-election to the board last November, have told him how lucky he is that he may now rid himself of all that work, responsibility and the backbiting from sources that want to dominate and milk the school system.

Since his chair was pulled from under him and his friend, the incumbent superintendent, was voted out of office, he has heard a great deal more of that kind of 'well-wishing' so that he has begun to appreciate the feelings of the convicted Englishman who was escorted to the top of a platform built for public executions. There was a great crowd present and his escorts were magnificently uniformed. The public executioner finally appeared with sword in hand to give his final explanation of what was to take place and to carry out the orders of the king. He commenced by informing the victim of the grandeur of the British Empire, tapering off with an enumeration of the essentials which made it great. England was a proud country, he said, and her officers set a great store by its time-honored ceremony and by her promptness in calling offenders to account for their violations of the law. But though justice was stern, continued the loquacious official, the king could not abide sloppiness or slipshod methods.

Then he showed him the sword and explained that the steel in that blade was made by an institution in Manchester which for more than 300 years had been noted for the fine cutlery it manufactured and sent to every part of the world. There is no steel like the steel in this blade and nothing is too good for the King. He continued with, "It has been honed to a razor-edge and will decapitate you so smoothly and so quickly that you will hardly feel it," he assured the victim. By this time the prisoner began to sob, "You make it sound so nice--for a minute there I was almost glad to have my head lopped off."

A few days ago an official of Churchill Downs explained the method for obtaining available reserved seats for the 1969 Kentucky Derby. There has been so much discussion about who won the last one that it

hardly seems possible that another is to be run in about four months.

Many sportsmen will begin to watch developments in the early stakes races in Florida, New Orleans, Arkansas and at Santa Anita in their zest to pick the winner of the greatest horse race on earth.

All of this calls to mind one of the greatest horse races that was ever run in Central City. Few persons will remember that our town once sent an entry to Churchill Downs who ran in the famous Bashford Manor stakes. It was a unique event from start to finish.

In the 20's some one told Shelby Gish of a fine thoroughbred colt for sale by Dick Coleman, who lived across the river from Paradise. He and Uncle George Dennis, his adviser on such matters, young Tobe Gish, his nephew, and Col. John (Cowboy) Vick went to

the Coleman farm to look him over. Cowboy John made an anatomical appraisal while Uncle George passed judgment on the breeding. He was out of the Sip Swain mare, Eda Riley, who in her day was purported to have won the "Michigan Derby." His sire was Marlin, a faithful old campaigner who Mr. Swain used alternately to plow corn with in the summer and to race on the county fair circuit in the fall. Uncle George approved and Shelby bought him. Since some 40 years before Young George had campaigned as stable boy, groom and exercise boy for his two uncles, Payne Faught, the owner, and Doc Faught, his jockey, Shelby persuaded him to train and condition the colt which they named "Sandy Bottom." Payne Faught was highly regarded by a circle of horsemen which included Nay Porter, later of Lexington; Bayse Howell of Louisville and Sip Swain of Prentiss.

This all came about because of a gray mare Payne Faught owned by the name of Bessie Nichols. She could run "a hole in the wind." One season she got 'hot' and they took her to the big circuit, the fairgrounds in New Orleans and other important places where she won. Up to the day he died, Uncle George kept a picture of Bessie Nichols and never went to a race without betting on "the old gray horse" in the race. There were several lean years before Determine and Native Dancer came along. So it is plain to see why he was nominated as head conditioner and trainer for Sandy Bottom. Shelby had nominated the horse for the Bashford Manor stakes as his initial race.

Came the spring meet in Louisville in the late Twenties and the horse was sleek and sharp. Except that he was



brown, he might have passed for "20 Grand." A box car was switched in on a siding and Sandy Bottom, Uncle George, Tobe Gish, Heavy Gish, Jimmy Lawton and a few others composing the cheering squad went aboard.

They disembarked at Churchill Downs. Soon came the big race: Sandy Bottom looked like a winner, in fact he started like a winner. Man O' War couldn't have gotten off more impressively, he went by the grandstand which had a full contingent of Central City rooters. They noted that he was literally tearing up the earth but some had already expressed the hope that he might soon start putting some of that dirt behind him, else they would be compelled to bum a way home. Several horses rounded the turn to the back stretch, but Sandy Bottom wasn't with them. When the first horse reached the finish line, Sandy Bottom was so far back that inexperienced race fans concluded he was the front runner of the next race.

Sandy Bottom thereafter raced brilliantly at county fairs under new ownership for several years but without winning. Uncle George was determined that he should win, so one day at Hartford he procured the services of a professional jockey and arranged for some special medication just before the race. The back side "fixer" had compounded a pill about the size of a banty hen egg.

Unfortunately, in those days they had no starting gates. So the system was such that a man called the "starter" maneuvered them around until they were all reasonably near in line and dropped a flag as a signal to "let them go."

Sandy Bottom looked fine-- he was eager but there were some unruly horses that delayed the start and before the starter could get them on the line, the "bomb" went off in Sandy Bottom and he charged out and ran the whole course getting around to the starting point about the time the others were turned loose. Even so, he went with the pack and for a minute it looked as if he were finally going to "break his maiden." No such luck... He was unaccustomed to such speed and couldn't believe his own feet, so on the first turn he went wide and crashed through the railing and again lost a race. Uncle George gave up. Thereafter Sandy Bottom became a familiar sight on the streets of Central City, pulling Uncle George's milk wagon in the early morning hours.

When this faithful steed had attained the age of 17 years, Uncle George, recalling the famous story of perseverance and belated victory of the Scotsman Robert Bruce, concluded to once again enter him in a match race at the new Central City race track with Pootie Gish as jockey. He ran neck and neck with a mare from Depoy until they were coming out of the back turn. The mare, ridden by Ray Neal McGinley, crowded the inside rail too closely, lost her footing and fell and Sandy Bottom became the proud winner of his "maidenrace" at the age of 17. The irony of it all was that the one horse he beat was a gray mare who bore a striking resemblance to Bessie Nichols.