

## AMERICA WORKS PODCAST

### OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE PROJECT, AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER

#### SEASON 1: EPISODE 8: PATRICK BOVENZI, Race Track Worker and Horse Identifier. Tampa Bay, Florida

Announcer: From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Theme Music: "Pay Day" played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

**Nancy Groce (Host):** Welcome to "America Works," excerpts from interviews with contemporary workers throughout the United States collected by the Library's American Folklife Center as part of its Occupational Folklife Project.

This is staff folklorist Nancy Groce, and this America Works episode features race track worker Patrick Boveniz. Originally from upstate New York, today Patrick works as an official at race tracks across this country. He is one of America's very few "horse identifiers" – that is, he is an expert who can assess and certify the identity of individual race horses.

Mr. Boveniz was interviewed by folklorist and Archie Green Fellow Ellen McHale at the Tampa Bay Downs Racetrack in Tampa Bay, Florida, on behalf of the American Folklife Center as part of her project "Stable Views: Voices and Stories from the Thoroughbred Race Track."

#### INTERVIEW

Patrick Bovenzi: Well, they built a race track seven miles from my home--Finger Lakes Race Track [New York State]. My family is not in the horse business. Had it not been for that fact, there was a race track literally in my backyard, I would have never set foot in one of these places (laughs). I started off when I was 14 years old walking "hots" at the Finger Lakes and just progressed through the ranks throughout the years.

I was the kid that always had the racing form with him in high school (laughs). In study hall, people would be studying; I'd be studying my form (laughs). Absolutely.

Ellen McHale: So when did you start walking hots?

Patrick Bovenzi: '68, summer of '68. I was 14 years old, I think I was. Lied about my age--told them I was 16. Got a license, starting walking hots. Sun up to sunset, seven days a week, 50 bucks a week. All through summers in high school and college, and yeah, it's what I've always

done (laughs). Absolutely. Went to school at RIT [Rochester Institute of Technology] and worked at Finger Lakes. Sure did.

Ellen McHale: So did you go to RIT for something that has to do with horses?

Patrick Bovenzi: No, it was General Studies, it was the major--actually Criminal Justice and General Studies, College of General Studies. But there is a direct correlation between what I learned in school and what I do now. I learned a lot about law. And when I'm not a horse identifier, I'm a steward, so it's applicable.

I've pretty much done everything in the horse racing business from stable boy to steward, done it all. And you know, groom, hot walker, assistant trainer. I've been a jockey agent. I have a trainer's license--I don't use it, but I have one. Then all the official jobs: paddock judge, placement judge, patrol judge, clerk of scales, horse identifier, obviously. And I just do it all (laughs).

Ellen McHale: What was the one you have done the longest?

Patrick Bovenzi: Horse identifier.

Ellen McHale: That's what you're doing now?

Patrick Bovenzi: That's what I do right now. There's only 59 of us in the country that do this that are certified to tattoo horses, too. And I do three or four different breeds. I do thoroughbreds, quarter horses, Arabians, paints. I do all of them four breeds. So I'm pretty busy. I work five days a week here, and like I say, tomorrow, I got to work in Miami. Tuesday I have to work in Ocala. No rest for the wicked (laughs).

Ellen McHale: So what does a horse identifier do?

Patrick Bovenzi: Just as the name implies, the title implies. My job is to determine the identity of these horses. When you look at your program and you see that--[flips a program book page]--for instance, that this horse, Nasty Girl, is in the first race. It is my job to determine that this is Nasty Girl--to the exclusion of every single horse on earth, this is the one, the only, the original Nasty Girl.

Ellen McHale: And how do you do that?

Patrick Bovenzi: Well, there is, horses have natural markings. You know, they have sex, they have color, their teeth tell me how old they are. And, in addition, you have all these natural markings: the white faces, and leg markings...And we examine every mark on the horse's body, including cowlicks, and we make the determination by comparing and contrasting the marks on their body with that on their registration papers and/or tattoo.

Ellen McHale: In their...

Patrick Bovenzi: Upper lip, upper lip... Horses cannot be tattooed before they're two, at least two years old. Most state racing commissions have a--in fact, they all do--they have a rule that says a horse -- most of them do--that you can run one time without a tattoo; that's with special permission. But most racing commissions mandate that the horse has a lip tattoo to run and that's where I come in.

When the horse walks up to me, in my mind I look and say, "Three-year-old chestnut filly," and you know, I can see her color as she walks up to me. And then I flip the lip and her teeth tell me how old she is. Then I look at the tattoo itself.

It's the toughest job in the racing office to fill. And I inherited the job when I was working in the racing office in Detroit. I was a placement judge and an entry clerk, and the then horse identifier got elevated to the position of steward. That opened up that job and, of course, there were no volunteers...and (laughs). Then the racing secretary says, "Well, Pat, you've got all this horse experience. You know a pastern from a corn hat, and you're the horse identifier." And it's one of them jobs you grow into. There's really no school to go to. It's a time-in-grade. You grow into it. You see all the marks and you figure it out for yourself.

Ellen McHale: Have you ever had a situation where someone tries to pull one over on you?

Patrick Bovenzi: Few times, (laughs), absolutely. About once a year, the wrong horse will show up in the paddock. And, of course, they'll invariably blame it on the incompetence of the groom. But what really gets me, though, is the trainers hand them this horse. If it were me: "You've got the wrong horse kid, send 'em back!" And the guy's saddling the horse, you know (laughs). So then he blames it on the groom.

I've had a couple of really big cases: In Indiana, where horses were mixed up right from the get-go, and this one horse he ran three different times, at three different race tracks! And the first time I had seen him, I'd had him scratched fifteen minutes before post after having looked at him for a minute--and that turned out to be a big deal. And we were right in scratching the horse. And there wasn't no deception; it was just two horses that were mixed up from the get-go, and nobody had the presence of mind to look at the markings and compare and contrast them to make sure they had the right horses. It was a non-descript horse, but certainly from an identifier's point of view, it was distinguishable from the other horse. And, like I said, we scratched that horse that day. The investigation ensued... We subsequently got it all straightened out. But there was a lot of redistribution of purse money, and some sanctioning, and bringing the wrong horse to the paddock, so it was big deal.

Ellen McHale: Now, you said you also tattoo?

Patrick Bovenzi: I do tattoo. I'm one of 59 tattooers in the country. We do about 1,700 a piece a year, And they just want to keep the numbers down, just so there's not a million sets of tattoo guys out there.

I have been bitten, but not every day (laughs)! I pride myself on doing some very good work—so they say. And I put up a legible tattoo-- and I have to read it; and the vets have to read it, and everyone has to read it. So I do my darnedest to put up a good, legible tattoo.

You've got some good, hardworking, honorable people, trying to make a living in a very, very competitive, very difficult business. Good people. And it's professional athletics and it's a way of life. It grows on you. I love it (laughs). It's what I do (laughs). It's what I've always done.

It's the greatest game played outdoors, no question about it!

END OF INTERVIEW

Nancy Groce (Host): You've been listening to race track worker and horse identifier Patrick Bovenzi, who was interviewed on behalf of the American Folklife Center by folklorist and Archie Green Fellow Ellen McHale in Tampa Bay, Florida.

To listen to the complete interview and hear more great stories from Mr. Bovenzi, please visit us online at [www.loc.gov/folklife](http://www.loc.gov/folklife).

On behalf of the American Folklife Center, this is folklorist Nancy Groce. Thank you for listening to America Works.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov).