

# Bronze medallist Tuttle was more than “Merely an American Horseman”

By James H. Goddard

Tuttle and Buster in traditional cavalry training, riding down an embankment at Brownsville, Texas.

Photo: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.



A four-year old boy, thrilled with the power of riding bareback on an immense, plodding plow horse, guiding it with just a strap in its mouth, absorbed the lessons just as his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather had done.<sup>1,2</sup> Coming of age in the late 1800's, this experience planted in him the skills and appreciation for the supreme and most valued tool of that time – the horse.

A young Hiram E. Tuttle was given a gift of deep understanding of the nature of horses. With refined skills in training his mounts, he would eventually land in company with the greatest American horse riders and trainers of all time. And what is more remarkable, his highest performing horses had been initially selected for racing or cavalry work, not performing. At least two had experienced devastating injuries that could have easily resulted in being put out to pasture. Tuttle's gift for training lifted them to feats beyond what anyone would have predicted based on their early work. Hiram E. Tuttle, reflecting on the time of his childhood:

*“The community standing of a man was usually measured by the quality and condition of his horses ... all community intercourse, whether light or heavy, was done with horses and a knowledge of them was considered a basic essential.”<sup>3</sup>*

Born in 1882 on a farm in Dexter, Maine, the curious and talented Tuttle needed to make his way using his mechanical skills, musical talents, dramatic flair, and his intellect to lift himself out of the rural existence and into a more sophisticated life. As a young man Tuttle worked at a blacksmith shop near his father's farm, using his flair for mechanics. He later went on to study engineering in Boston, Massachusetts, and subsequently worked in the automatic watch machinery business. At age 26, he pursued the study of law at Boston's Suffolk University, achieving the highest average marks to that date at the school, and graduated in 1912.<sup>4</sup> He gained membership to the Massachusetts state bar and practiced law outside Boston for five years.

He was a versatile and talented individual, having learned to play the violin at an early age in school,



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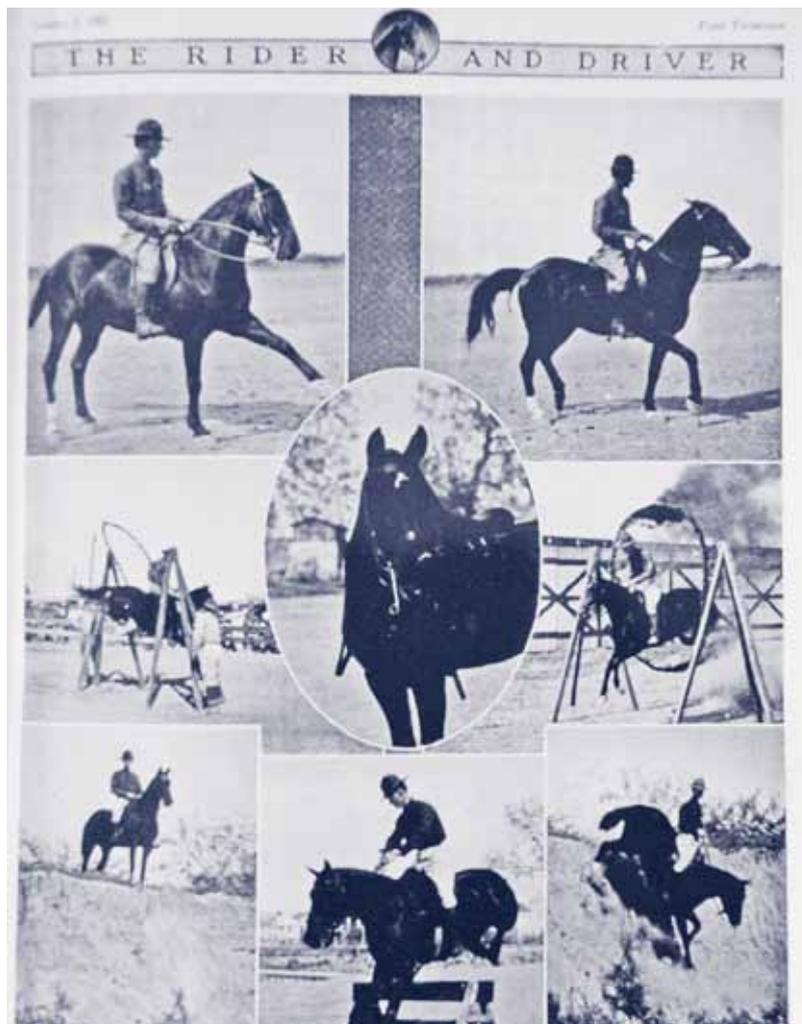
and later in Portland, Maine, and finally under the direction of the soloist for the Boston Symphony. He was also skilled in drama.<sup>5</sup> He used his music to put himself through college, and even conducted light opera and musical comedy in and around the Boston area with troupes as large as one hundred in the cast and chorus. While in the Army at Fort Riley, Kansas, "when our National life was a little more tranquil" he became involved with the Dramatic Club and directed as many as five productions in the winter season, and even worked with the Cavalry School Band as a guest conductor for a series of concerts of both popular and semi classical numbers.<sup>6</sup>

### The cavalry calls a horseman back to his roots

But war disrupted life. Wanting to help in any way possible, three days after the declaration of the First World War he enlisted in the Army, which thrust him back to his childhood roots – real horse work. After Plattsburg Officer Candidate School in upstate New York, he was commissioned a second lieutenant in August 1917. As the war progressed his business talents were recognized and he was placed in the Quartermaster Corps, and was a motor transport officer in the Brownsville, Texas district.<sup>7</sup>

His Army assignments created a circuitous route that revealed his gift for bringing out the talents of his mounts: the art of training under his delicate and insightful hand. He kept his riding horse, *Buster*, with him at the motor truck camp two miles from the main post in Brownsville. He converted a vacant truck stall for his horse's box stall, and despite having motor transportation available at his disposal, he rode his mount back and forth daily to the truck camp. The park there was his training lot, and he taught *Buster* to jump obstacles, do the Spanish Walk, and even to jump through a 0.93x1.52m oval burning hoop! *Buster* and Tuttle were in great demand at carnivals and rodeos and were even featured with photos in the 15<sup>th</sup> January 1921 edition of *The Rider and Driver* horse magazine.<sup>8</sup> Tuttle's careful guidance of *Buster*, a horse that had been nearly killed after being hit by a large Army truck, was just one of many of his miraculous feats of training.<sup>9</sup>

After the Great War, while still in Texas, Tuttle won an Officer's Open Jumping Class in 1923, sponsored by the 15<sup>th</sup> Artillery then with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division at Camp Travis, Texas, against forty-three other contenders, making "a clean performance over a four-foot course of sixteen jumps".<sup>10</sup> Tuttle attended Troop Officer's Class at Fort Riley, Kansas, and then did remount work at Fort Robinson, Nebraska, where he oversaw the purchase and breaking of horses and mules for the Army.<sup>11</sup> During that winter of 1924-25 his team of 20 riders made ready over 600 horses. After one year he was sent overseas



to Camp Stotsenburg, in the Philippines, charged with wagon and pack transportation as well as the quartermaster corral and the forage farm. He was also detailed to manage the Camp's Sports Carnival Horse Show, and as a competitor he won both the junior and advanced equitation schooling classes in 1926.<sup>12</sup> His business sense and farming experience were put on display when he developed the curing of cogan grass for hay feeding at a cost that was only 30% of the same weight for rice and oat hay feeding, saving the Army \$14 per ton<sup>13</sup>, the equivalent of about \$178 per ton of savings in current US dollars.<sup>14</sup>

### Tuttle's \$1 lame horse, named *Olympic*

It was when he returned to the United States that Tuttle received a gift he would cherish for the rest of his life. Horse training and organisation were his expertise, and he spent a year in the Office of the Chief of Remount in Washington, DC. The Remount Service provided horses (and later mules and dogs) to US Army units. While there, he also was the active manager of the National Capital Horse Show in 1929.<sup>15</sup> And it was during the summer of that year that he made a connection that

**Tuttle and *Buster* showing the results of tireless saddle horse training and repair of the spirit and ability of a horse that was almost killed in a collision with a truck. *Buster* learned the Spanish Walk, and would jump through a hoop of fire.**

Photo: *The Rider and Driver* magazine, 15<sup>th</sup> January 1921



Tuttle on his bronze medal mount, *Olympic*.

would change the course of history for dressage in America.

Tuttle spent his summer vacation helping Mr. E.Q. McVitty with his polo ponies on Long Island, and refused payment for this work that he loved. But McVitty found a splendid way to repay him – after Tuttle’s return to the Remount Office in Washington, DC, a courier delivered a message: “Your horse has been delivered. Please pay \$1.00.”<sup>16</sup> This was *Olympic* (a name that foretold their collective future), the horse that carried Col. Tuttle to Olympic glory less than three years later, and the highest placing as of that date of an American-trained horse in a schooling event.<sup>17</sup>

*Olympic*, a thorough bred, had been imported from France where he was a steeplechaser. McVitty had settled for second place twice at the Meadowbrook Hunt and *Olympic* was his hope to change his luck. But the horse had a hard time with the transition from turf in France to the hard tracks in the USA, and went lame. McVitty knew the best place for a project like *Olympic* was with a lover of horses, like Hiram Tuttle.<sup>18</sup>

### Low expectations for US Dressage in 1932

The very next year began the Colonel’s trail to the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. In January of 1930 a conference was held in the Office of the Chief of Cavalry to formulate plans for promoting equestrian events at the Games. Tuttle was not a part of the conference, but at its conclusion he was detailed to begin training for the individual dressage competition. He was transferred to Fort Riley in June, and he was eventually placed in charge of the dressage section. Tuttle later went with the

Olympic team to Fort Rosecrans, California, to complete the teams’s final training.<sup>19</sup>

Dressage competition at the Olympic Games began in the Stockholm Games in 1912. The rules at that time only allowed military officers and military-owned mounts to compete, and the movements were slightly different than present competitions, including some jumping.<sup>20</sup> In January of that year, the US War Department sent out a special order stating that the cavalry should put together a team for the Games. Fort Riley was selected as the training site, and Captain Guy V. Henry Jr. led the effort. No funding was provided so the cavalry raised money through events held around the country. That team took bronze in the three-day event and fourth in the Prix des Nations (show jumping).<sup>21</sup> As one might expect, the host nation, Sweden, dominated the dressage competition that year and at the next Olympic Games in 1920 at Antwerp.

The USA did not field an Olympic dressage team until 1932, and the outcomes were not expected to be so impressive. The Great Depression no doubt put financial constraints on the countries entering the Games, and fewer riders and horses were able to attend in Los Angeles than in the previous Olympics with equestrian competitions. Unlike other Olympic events, which may have needed a discus, a pole, or even a sailboat, taking care to transport a live animal prepared for competition is both delicate and expensive. The American equine entrants had a mere 18 months of training before the Games, in comparison to as much as 5 to 8 years of training for those entrants from other nations.<sup>22</sup> And the shipping of horses from countries such as Japan and Europe involved weeks of travel in crates on rocky seas and on trains with varying weather. This sort of transportation for the Olympic Games was quite an investment during that low economic period.

Tuttle, as US Olympic dressage team captain, opined that they had little support from the military’s effort to try this form of equestrian competition:



Horses being offloaded from a ship for Olympic competition.

Photos: U.S. Cavalry Museum, Fort Riley, Kansas; 1932 Los Angeles Olympic Games Official Report



*It is only fair to the members of the dressage team to state that they had very little encouragement. We were told that we would be entered merely as a gesture of the host nation, that they knew we had no chance of placing and that all efforts would be confined to the jumping and the three-day event.*<sup>23</sup>

### **Much more than a rider – Tuttle was a masterful, self-taught trainer**

Tuttle was truly self-taught in horse training and dressage. And essentially everyone else in the US Army learned dressage from him. Even the “Father of Dressage” in the United States, USDF and Nebraska Dressage Association founder Lowell Boomer, made regular treks to see Tuttle and Kitts school their horses at Fort Riley,<sup>24</sup> before the Cavalry’s mechanization, lack of need for horses, and their abandonment of equestrian pursuits.<sup>25</sup>

*I claim the unique distinction of being an American product in every sense of the word. I am not a graduate of any foreign school of equitation or have not received any instructions in the equitation except at the Cavalry School, Fort Riley, Kansas. I am merely an American horseman. – Hiram E. Tuttle*<sup>26</sup>

He also had a protégé, Lt. Robert Borg, who first became interested in dressage after seeing Tuttle’s performance at the 1932 Games. Tuttle recommended Borg join the US Cavalry and in 1943 he joined Tuttle at Fort Riley to be an instructor of advance equitation.<sup>27</sup> Borg was a member of the 1948 London Olympic dressage team that took a silver medal, the highest

place in US dressage team history, and fourth in the individual competition in London<sup>28</sup> contributing to the team’s second place finish<sup>29</sup> (this outcome was aided by the Swedish team being disqualified for including a non-commissioned officer on their team).<sup>30,31</sup>

### **Historic American ranking in LA – its finest Olympic individual dressage performance to date**

In the 1932 individual dressage competition, 10 riders competed from France, Mexico (with one rider, and therefore not in the team event), Sweden, and the United States. The officials were General M. Laffont (FRA), Colonel Sloan Doak (USA) and Count Carl Gustaf Bonde (SWE), while the Jury of Appeal for equestrian competition was made up of Guy V. Henry (USA), Clarence von Rosen (SWE), and Georges Hector (FRA).<sup>32</sup> The mix of national origins in the judging pool and the appeal pool made for an attempt at equality in any judging of the outcomes.

The venue was at maximum capacity of about 9000 attendees, and the viewers were enraptured, giving every horse the benefit of silence in the arena. A writer for the *Los Angeles Times* described the crowd’s behavior as beyond what anyone expected: “Never before in the history of American enthusiasm has any one sporting event so completely subdued every man, woman and child in the grand stands. The sound of whirling motors on motion-picture cameras pierced through the silence sounding like the staccato of a machine gun as each horse went through the intricate performance; the crackle of a programme made one turn and raise a finger as a signal for more positive silence.”<sup>33</sup>

**The US Equestrian Team for the 1932 Los Angeles Olympic Games, with Tuttle and Olympic positioned on the far left.**

Photo: LA84 Foundation archives



**Dressage competition of the 1932 Olympic Games at the Riviera Polo Club.**

Photo: LA84 Foundation archives

The competition itself included the best of the best in Olympic dressage, including several medallists from three previous Olympics. It also featured a controversial decision leading to the disqualification of one of the more famous Olympic dressage riders of that era. The judges assign ordinals to place the competitors, with a point total system used as a tiebreaker.<sup>34</sup> French rider François Lesage (bronze medallist in 1924) on *Taine* and the Swedish rider Bertil Sandström (silver medallist in both 1920 and 1924) on *Kreta*, were in the first two spots, while Tuttle and *Olympic* were tied with another French rider, Charles Marion (second in 1928) on *Linon*, in the ordinals. But the American pair were behind Marion and *Linon* in points.<sup>35</sup>

However, the silence of the arena revealed a flaw in Sandström's performance. Both French and American riders accused him of making clicking sounds with his tongue to encourage his horse, *Kreta*. Despite his claim to the Jury of Appeal that it was merely squeaking sounds from his saddle, the protest was upheld and the Swedish pair were relegated to 10<sup>th</sup> and last place.<sup>36,37</sup> Suddenly, Marion and *Linon* were thrust into second place, and Hiram Tuttle and *Olympic* of the fresh American team

won the bronze medal in the individual dressage competition.

In addition to Tuttle's bronze, the US medalled in the team dressage competition as well. This is still the only time the USA has had a medallist in Olympic individual dressage competition.<sup>38</sup> In fact, though only three teams competed, that dressage team of Tuttle (on *Olympic*), Alvin Moor (on *Water Pat*), and Isaac Kitts (on *American Lady*) won the bronze medal in a very close competition with the French (gold) and Swedish (silver) teams.<sup>39</sup>

Sandström is considered among the *Top Dressage Riders of All Time* (No. 69, while Tuttle is ranked No. 41),<sup>40</sup> but due to this calamity he is also listed among the most famous "cheats" by others.<sup>41, 42</sup> It should be noted that disqualification in dressage competition was not completely unheard of. Gustaf Adolf Boltensstern (SWE) who, in the 1920 Games was initially scored second just ahead of Sandström, had the same fate, leading to Sandström gaining the silver medal.<sup>43</sup>

Col. Tuttle's bronze medal in individual dressage secured his place in Olympic history, and their bronze in the team dressage event gave the Americans unexpected accolades!

### The passion of training and performing with cherished horses

At a time when "the laurels of fancy horsemanship ... rested for years with the crack cavalry units of some of the Old World armies", Tuttle not only could ride well and compete with those from across the seas, he could train his mounts, as dressage required, "to perform with the grace and precision of a dancer".<sup>44</sup> He was a master at training horses from his first assignment in the Army. In addition to *Buster*, the horse he trained while stationed in Texas, he trained others to become show-stoppers in their ability to perform. His amazing work with *Olympic*, molding him from a lame steeplechaser

**Hiram Tuttle's individual and team dressage bronze medals, 1932 Los Angeles.**

Photo: Jim Goddard Olympic Collection



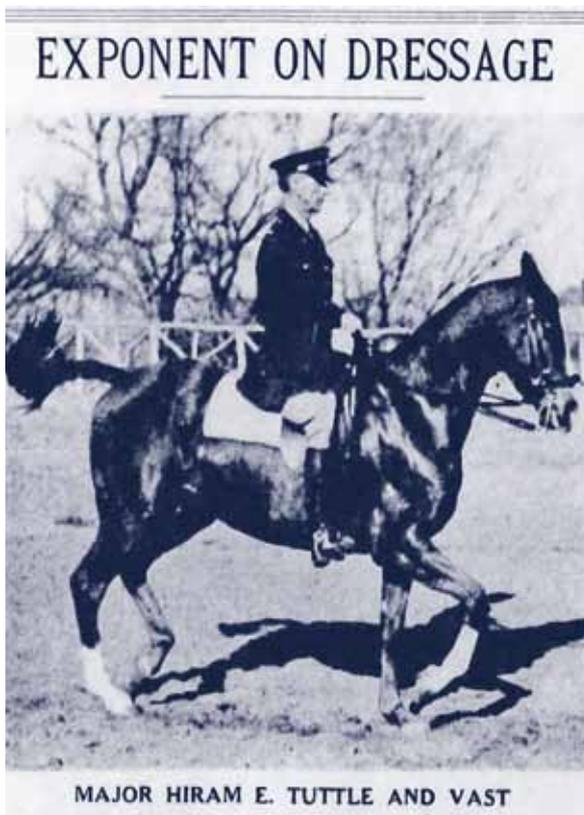


“Exponent on Dressage” – Tuttle and Vast illustrate a story about Tuttle’s “Lectures on equitation and dressage ...” given at the Cavalry Armory in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Photo: *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, 19<sup>th</sup> April 1938

Far right: *Si Murray* whispering to Tuttle at the Denver National Western Stock Show, with the caption reading: “Say, colonel, I’m really going to help you put on a show here this year.”

Image: *The Denver Post*, 11<sup>th</sup> January 1941



### Beyond the days in the arena, he continued to love his mounts

Tuttle went on to compete on the dressage team at the 1936 Olympics, placing 27<sup>th</sup> on *Si Murray*. He was named to be a part of the dressage team for the 1940 Games in Helsinki, which were cancelled due to war in Europe.<sup>63</sup> He continued to train his horses at Fort Riley until his retirement in 1944,<sup>64</sup> after which he got special permission from the Army, at no expense to them, to keep his horses at Fort Riley, just eight kilometres from his home in Junction City, Kansas. He continued to work with his horses there late into his lifetime.

Col. Tuttle died 11<sup>th</sup> November 1956 at the age of 73 and was buried at Fort Riley Cemetery with military honours.<sup>65</sup> Nearby three of his horses, *Olympic*, *Si Murray* and *Vast*, are also buried. Tuttle was inducted into the US Dressage Hall of Fame in 2002.<sup>66</sup> Soon after his death a street in Junction City, Kansas, was named in his honor: Tuttle Way. And in 1991, officials in Manhattan, Kansas honoured him with a new Tuttle Park. ■

Tuttle’s toast to a horse:<sup>67</sup>

*Faithful to his master.  
Generous in his efforts.  
Constant in his love for companionship, and  
Beautiful in his physical creation ...  
Is my tribute to the horse.*

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- 2 Hiram E. Tuttle, *Ancestral and Historical Background of Captain Hiram E. Tuttle*; from the estate of Gladys Tuttle, provided by the Law Offices of Hoover, Shermerhorn, Edwards, Pinaire & Rombold, Junction City, Kansas, p. 2
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Biographical notes about Hiram Tuttle; from the estate of Gladys Tuttle, provided by the Law Offices of Hoover, Shermerhorn, Edwards, Pinaire & Rombold, Junction City, Kansas; dated 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1944
- 5 Shambach, p. 26
- 6 Tuttle, p. 4
- 7 Shambach, p. 26
- 8 Tuttle, p. 1
- 9 *The Rider and Driver* magazine, 15<sup>th</sup> January 1921; “Saddle Horse Training”, p. 12; courtesy of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library
- 10 Tuttle, p. 1
- 11 Shambach, p. 26
- 12 Tuttle, p. 2
- 13 Biographical notes, p. 2
- 14 Tuttle, p. 3
- 15 Ibid, p. 2
- 16 Shambach, p. 26–27
- 17 Biographical notes, p. 1
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Tuttle, p. 2
- 20 *Horse Previews Magazine*, “History of Dressage”, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1998
- 21 Betty Bolte, *The History of Dressage*, p. 16
- 22 *Los Angeles Times*, “Rider’s Mastery Over Horse To Be Shown Today as Dressage Opens Equestrian Events”, 10<sup>th</sup> August 1932, p. 14
- 23 Tuttle, p. 2
- 24 Nebraska Dressage Association; “Nebraska: The Birthplace of Organized Dressage in America” – “Our History”; nebraskadressage.org
- 25 Jennifer O. Bryant, *The USFD Guide to Dressage*, Storey Publishing, 2006, p. 6
- 26 Tuttle, p. 2



The "Dressage Family", including Colonel Tuttle and his wife, Gladys Tuttle, along with, from left to right, Si Murray, Olympic, Peter Brown, and Vast.

Photo: US Cavalry Museum, Fort Riley, Kansas

- 27 *The Chronicle of the Horse*; "Dressage Olympian Maj. Robert Borg Dies", 19<sup>th</sup> April 2005; [chronofhorse.com/article/dressage-olympian-maj-robert-borg-dies](http://chronofhorse.com/article/dressage-olympian-maj-robert-borg-dies)
- 28 "The Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame"; [USDF.org/halloffame/profiles/tuttle.asp](http://USDF.org/halloffame/profiles/tuttle.asp)
- 29 *Horse & Man*, "Did You Know ... The First Equestrian Olympic Team Was the Cavalry? Yup.", 9<sup>th</sup> November 2011; [horseandman.com/people-and-places](http://horseandman.com/people-and-places)
- 30 Equestrian at the 1948 London Summer Games: Men's Dressage, Team Stats; [Sports-Reference.com](http://Sports-Reference.com)
- 31 David Wallechinsky, *The Complete Book of the Summer Games*, 1996 Edition, Sports Illustrated, p. 393
- 32 *Official Report of the Los Angeles Olympic Summer Games 1932*, p. 713
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- 34 Equestrianism at the 1932 Los Angeles Summer Games: Men's Dressage, Individual, [Sports-Reference.com](http://Sports-Reference.com)
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- 38 John Wilkinson, "Will The Americans Ever Master Dressage? Lack of Classical Culture and the Curse of Hiram Tuttle", [HorseNetwork.com](http://HorseNetwork.com)
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- 40 Alex Trost/Vadim Kravetsky, *100 of the Top Dressage Riders of All Time*
- 41 Floyd Conner; *The Olympics Most Wanted: The Top 10 Book of the Olympics' Gold Medal Gaffes, Improbable Triumphs and Other Oddities*, Brassey's, Wash. D.C., 2001, p. 242
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- 44 "Famed Tuttle Dressage Horses Ready - Unusual Gaits Are Demonstrated by Kansas Mounts"; 13<sup>th</sup> January 1940; newspaper clipping of unknown printing from the estate of Gladys Tuttle, provided by the Law Offices of Hoover, Shermerhorn, Edwards, Pinaire & Rombold, Junction City, Kansas
- 45 Shambach, p. 27
- 46 *Boston Traveler*, "Dressage is Rodeo Feature - Major Tuttle and His Horses Fascinating Exhibition"; date unknown (1937?); newspaper clipping, from the estate of Gladys Tuttle, provided by the Law Offices of Hoover, Shermerhorn, Edwards, Pinaire & Rombold, Junction City, Kansas
- 47 *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, "Course Near End In Handling Horses", 8<sup>th</sup> November 1938, Cincinnati, Ohio, p. 22
- 48 Shambach, p. 27
- 49 "Hiram Tuttle, equestrian"; [Liquisearch.com](http://Liquisearch.com)
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- 57 Tuttle, p. 5
- 58 "Dressage is Highlight..."; p. 9
- 59 *Los Angeles Times*, 10<sup>th</sup> August 1932, p. 14
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- 61 "Dressage is Highlight"; p. 8
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- 62 Ibid.
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- 65 Shambach, p. 27
- 66 "The Roemer Foundation"
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