

Sunny Jim's 90th Birthday

By Jack Mann

Of The Herald Tribune Staff

OCEANPORT, N. J.

At his 90th birthday party yesterday James Edward Fitzsimmons looked back over 79½ years on the race track and decided it was just as well.

"There wasn't another damned thing I could have done anyway," Mr. Fitz said. "I had no education because I've been taking care of myself since I was 10. I had the horse bug and it was lucky I did."

His body bent like a question mark by arthritis and age but his eyes as bright and blue as the sky over Monmouth Park, Mr. Fitz was surrounded by fourscore members of his tribe. That total includes husbands and wives absorbed in the last half-century or so, but how many thoroughbred Fitzsimmonses have been foaled since Mr. Fitz' first-born, John, in 1893?

"Well, I had six children," said the man with the rare disposition to support the appellation "Sunny Jim" grace-



Herald Tribune—UPI telephoto

Sunny Jim Birthday Cheers

fully for all these years, "and 17 grandchildren. I can never tell how many great-grandchildren, I think it's about 40. He summoned a granddaughter to run an inventory.

"Well, I have 13," she began, "and Edythe has 10. . ."

"I gotta have a chart made one of these days," said the man who is a few months senior to Winston Churchill. "People keep asking me."

"It's 39," the granddaughter concluded, "and one on the way."

"That's why I can never tell," Mr. Fitz said.

The trainer of Gallant Fox and Omaha and Misty Morn and Nashua and Bold Ruler accepted another television set from the Monmouth man-

agement, this one, fortunately, a very portable type.

"He has one upstairs, one downstairs and one in the paddock at Aqueduct," John said. "He can watch this one in the bathtub."

If Mr. Fitz was not literally born on a racetrack, he didn't miss by much. They built the old Sheepshead Bay track around the house of his birth and ran races around him for a few of his tender years. Going on 11, he made himself handy around the track and kept getting handier.

Soon he was a jockey, and soon he wasn't any more. "I got big," he said, "I rode my last race in New York in 1902, but I rode a few more later on what they called the out-law tracks."

It was suggested that the steam bath he enjoys in his Florida home might have kept him riding longer. "That's for fun," he said. "I don't get enough exercise any more, so I like the steam to get the poisons out of the system. But it's different when you have to go in the box for a living. I wasn't much of a rider anyway."

So he had to become a trainer and the rest is history. It is not quite true that he couldn't have become anything else. He could have been a street-car conductor in Philadelphia.

"My wife had a step-mother-in-law," he said, "and she thought I was away from home too much. So she got her nephew, George, to get me a job."

The tale has been told that Young Jim Fitzsimmons was on his way to work, lunch box in hand, when he met a horse owner and retired from the street-car business. "It wasn't that close," he said, "but it wasn't far from it. I just figured out I was sending more money home from the tracks than I could have made on the street car. So that was that."

How, he was asked, did the stepmother-in-law take that? "She didn't like it, he said, "but a few years later we were making some money and having some fun, and she came to visit. 'Suppose I'd taken that street car job,' I asked her, 'and we'd missed all this?'"

"I was kidding, but she said: 'You wouldn't have missed anything. You'd have become president of the company.'"

Breathes there another man who has saddled two triple crown winners, lived to be 90, exploded the population and won such an accolade from a mother-in-law?