



# BLACK COWBOYS ALSO RODE

*by Barbara J. Richardson*

**O**NE OF THE MOST EXCITING PERIODS in Southwest history was the cowboy era. It was also one of the shortest in terms of time and life. During those years, a boy who wanted to be a cowboy started young, grew up fast and couldn't anticipate reaching old age.

The former slaves and escaped slaves who came west from the South between 1830 and 1860 were unpaid cowboys roping and branding cattle and also driving longhorns to markets far north into Montana. At the end of the trail when the herd was sold and the cattlemen returned home, some of these cowboys were left behind. Fortunately, they were needed as cooks and drovers with other outfits. For many of them, the Southwest became a haven where they enjoyed freedom on the range and learned the art of cowpunching. This skill would earn them their first pay. Black cowboys established themselves as a recognized and able force of muscle, stamina, and dependability.

These talents were used when Charles Goodnight and Oliver Loving combined their herds in 1866 and blazed a trail out of Texas into Wyoming and

Montana. They were used by other cattlemen on the Chisholm Trail from Abilene, Texas, to Kansas. *Los vaqueros negros* of the Southwest worked as wranglers, drove chuckwagons, and fought Indians. They battled wolves, prairie fires, and the elements of nature. Many died on the trail just like other cowboys. Some were brave, some were heroes, and some were villains. Richard E. Harris puts it this way in his book *The First 100 Years*:

The cattle business was an integral part of the West's economy and Black ranch hands often constituted a fourth of the work force. They went on long cattle drives, fought off rustlers, rounded up herds, and tamed wild stallions. Often their duties were voluntarily expanded as America sought to tame the West. Civil-law enforcement with the sheriffs and the marshals was to be a stabilizing force, and although more perilous than lucrative, it often looked to the Black cowboy for a helping hand. They were sometimes utilized as "unofficial deputies."<sup>1</sup>

One such "unofficial deputy," says Harris, was John Swain of Tombstone, a "man carelessly referred to as 'Nigger' Jim" and "probably the most-honored and certainly the longest-lived of all Black cowboys. He was part of Tombstone from the beginning to its demise as a wild western town."

According to Harris, Swain arrived in Tombstone in 1877 with his protégé, John Slaughter, who proceeded to carve out a cattle empire. Somewhere in the process, Slaughter appointed as his "head honchos" Swain and another Black, John Baptiste (known as "Old Bat"). Apparently the three of them—Slaughter, Swain, and "Old Bat"—comprised a "formidable alliance," on many occasions defending successfully the Slaughter ranches from Apache raids led by Geronimo and also tracking rustled cattle into Mexico. After Slaughter retired as Sheriff of Cochise County, Swain got married and settled



John Swain, early Arizona cowboy who lived in Tombstone. (Photo courtesy Richard E. Harris)

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in Tombstone, declaring that "I came here when there wasn't no Tombstone or nothing, but Indians. And I intend to stay here 'til I die." And so he did, working "as a custodian in the county courthouse until 1931, when it was abandoned." He died in February, 1945, "four months short of the century mark he had hoped to reach." His funeral services glowed with tributes to him by members of the Ninth and the Tenth Cavalry; and the people of Tombstone honored Swain's last request—that he be buried in the Old Boot Hill Cemetery. Swain's life and the respect paid him at his death, says Harris, show that "In a land where men were so busy defending themselves against the unpredictable elements, renegades or avenging Indians, there was little time to be pestered about the full name or color of a good, brave man."<sup>2</sup>

Bose Ikard, a black cowboy who worked for Charles Goodnight, was another "good, brave man." Goodnight once said of him: "Bose surpassed any man I had in endurance and stamina. There was a dignity, a cleanliness and reliability about him that was wonderful.... I have trusted him further than any other living man."<sup>3</sup> Proof of this statement lies in the fact that Goodnight employed Ikard as a sort of banker. At the time, cattle rustlers were everywhere on the trail waiting to rob cattle barons of the money they often carried on their persons. Goodnight developed the policy of trusting Ikard to carry the money because, reasoned Goodnight, outlaws wouldn't rob a poor black man or even think that he might be carrying his employer's horde of money from cattle sales. Later, Ikard rode with other cattle kings, like Oliver Loving, John Chisum, and John Slaughter.

Another black cowboy closely associated with a cattle king was Frank Chisum, who had been purchased in 1861 and who, after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, stayed on with John Chisum as a devoted employee. "Nigger Frank" (Chisum) worked as a horse wrangler for one of the drives up the Goodnight-Loving Trail. Later, when John Chisum built a ranch on the Pecos River near Roswell, New Mexico, Frank perceived that the black bottom land along the river was rich, virgin soil, ideal for growing fruits. In 1868, he planted the first orchard in New Mexico on the Pecos River. Frank was loyal and responsible, and John Chisum used him in positions of high trust. In 1878, Frank was sent to accompany the children of James Chisum, John's brother, from their home on the Canadian border to Anton Chico, New Mexico. In 1880, John Chisum branded 200 head of cattle in Frank's brand as a reward for Frank's faithful service during John's long bout with smallpox in 1879. After John's death, Frank became a successful independent rancher. He retired from ranching in his later years and lived in Roswell. He was remembered by old timers for his uncanny, accurate recall of events that had happened years earlier. One thing he recalled

vividly was the senseless lynching of a man on one of the cattle drives. He could never forget the horror.<sup>4</sup>

Although black cowboys did enjoy considerable freedom and respect on the range, they rarely rose to the position of foreman or range boss. But "Nigger Add" (Add Jones) of the LFD Ranch in Otero County, New Mexico, was range boss over a crew of South Texas black cowboys. These LFD cowboys worked the herd during long trail drives, stood guard when their turn came, and even after a 12- to 16-hour workday enjoyed participating in 'Lasses (black cowboy singing). An interesting footnote here is that the cowboy-writer Howard Thorpe first heard 'Lasses at the LFD camp one evening when he happened to ride in and was given supper by Add Jones. Thorpe stated later that the LFD 'Lasses inspired the beginning of his career as a song collector. And it should also be noted here that Add Jones became the subject of one of these songs.<sup>5</sup>

So respected and beloved was Add Jones that the following story is told: When the word went out that Add was about to be married to a "nice Black woman," his many friends began planning the wedding gifts they would present to the couple. However, because of the great distances between the ranches, the friends couldn't compare notes so as to avoid duplication of gifts. After the wedding, when Add and his bride called at the Roswell freight depot to claim the gifts which had been sent there, they found nineteen cookstoves.<sup>6</sup>

A particularly interesting black cowboy was a man named George, who had left Texas in 1868 and had found work with Gibson Robards from the 101 Spread in Oklahoma. George followed Robards to Trinidad, Colorado, and later into New Mexico. Robards gave George the surname McJunkin after the McJunkin Ranch, where Robards had grown up. While helping to drive XYZ cattle from Oak Grove near Silver City to the Crowfoot Ranch in Union County, George had his first experience of the Cimarron's fresh spring water and pleasant climate. He decided that he wanted to live there, and took a job as



George McJunkin as a young man. (Photo courtesy Mary Germond of Santa Monica, California)

foreman for Mr. and Mrs. Bill Jacks on the Crowfoot Ranch. Later, George was hired by Dr. Thomas Owens of the nearby Pitchfork Ranch and became, again, foreman over an all-white ranchero. In the years that followed, George McJunkin came to be considered the best all-around cowboy on the ranch.<sup>7</sup> He is best remembered now, though, as the finder, in 1908, of some large bison bones, which eventually led scholars to establish the presence of man in the area some 10,000 years ago. Yes, it was George McJunkin who discovered the Folsom site, the first recognized Early Man site in North America.<sup>8</sup>

Since book learning was a rare commodity among black cowboys during the latter half of the nineteenth century, these men did not record their adventures, but they did tell their stories to others. And those stories survived in the memories of interested people, who in turn passed them on to the next generation. This oral tradition has preserved for posterity the contributions of many black cowboys—for example, Al Jones, who served as foreman of the Lytle and Steven Ranch in Texas when they sent their herds north to market in 1885,<sup>9</sup> and Ned Hillyard, also a Texan, who proved himself to be a “rough and ready, honest-to-goodness cowboy...at 14.”<sup>10</sup> Also, many stories are told about a man known only as “Jeff,” who arrived at the Holbrook-St. John area in 1877 with the Greer family from Texas. He is remembered as a romantic figure doing battle for the Greers when that powerful clan waged virtual war with Mexican shepherders over territorial and grazing rights.<sup>11</sup> Other stories concern one Harvey Merchant, who as a child had been captured by Indians while he was traveling west from Texas with a small party of white people. Several years later, he was rescued by a company of Buffalo Soldiers from Fort Huachuca—and in later life he gained a reputation as “one of the best cowboys in southwestern Arizona.”<sup>12</sup>

There was, however, at least one black cowboy who did write down his experiences: Nat Love, alias Red River Dick, alias Deadwood Dick. He had been born a slave in Tennessee in June, 1854. His first job was as a range hand with the Duval outfit in Tennessee. In 1872, he signed on with the Pete Galliger Company of Southern Arizona as chief brand reader, a job which led him throughout the Southwest and eventually into the Territory of New Mexico. In New Mexico, Love's friends included the notorious Billy the Kid, whom Nat claimed to have met in a saloon in Anton Chico, New Mexico. Nat bragged he knew everyone of significance in the West: the James brothers, Buffalo Bill Cody, Kit Carson, and the Kid.<sup>13</sup>

Bill Pickett and Jess Stahl, both black, were skilled riders who toured the country with the rodeos. Pickett rode for the 101 Ranch in Oklahoma and is

credited with inventing and developing the art of "bulldogging." His technique has been described in this way:

He...piled off onto a big steer's back and grasped a horn in each of his strong hands, dug his heels into the ground to slow the steer, and began to twist its neck in order to turn its nose upward. When he was able to reach the nose, he sank his...teeth into the steer's tender upper lip, turned loose with both hands, and gave his body a twist. The steer fell over on its side and lay still as Pickett held it bite-'em style.<sup>14</sup>

Pickett is also remembered for an unscheduled "appearance" with Will Rogers, who sometimes assisted at the big-time rodeos. The story goes that during a rodeo being held in New York, a steer managed to escape and was chased by Bill Pickett and Will Rogers.<sup>15</sup>

One place Blacks were commonly found in a cattle drive was behind the chuck wagon. These cooks performed their culinary arts and turned out mouthwatering delights. Black cooks on ranches in New Mexico included Frank Mayes of the Loving Ranch; John Manlove with the Chisum Ranch; Big Jim Smith, Francis Boyer, Sam Woods, and E. D. Brooks of the Rosewell Ranches; George McKenzie, "Quince," "Ef," and "Ed" with the Oliver Lee Ranch in Alamogordo.<sup>16</sup> Burrell Dickerson was an oxen driver who drove the famed Chisholm Trail in 1870. He drove his own sturdy chuck wagon over every hillside and ravine in southern New Mexico, hiring himself out for different drives. Gabe Wilson was another oxen driver who took his kitchen pack up many trails behind or ahead of cattle drives.<sup>17</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, the iron horse had replaced the long trail drives. An era filled with challenge and danger came to a close. The black cowboys, although left out of the fiction and the history of the period, were nevertheless present—making significant contributions which historians are now beginning to recognize and to research. ☆

#### NOTES

1. Richard E. Harris, *The First 100 Years* (Mesa, Arizona: Loggreen Press, 1983), 23.
2. *Ibid.*, 23-25.
3. Phillip Durham and Everett Jones, *The Negro Cowboy* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1945), 96.
4. Interview taken by Professor Francis M. Boyer with his old friend Add Jones in 1920. Boyer and Jones rode the range together and cooked together on cattle drives. Boyer was a recorder of early Black history.
5. Nathan N. Thorpe in collaboration with Neil M. Clark, *Pardners of the Wind* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, Ltd.), 22-23.
6. *Ibid.*, 22; Barbara J. Richardson, *Black Pioneers of New Mexico* (Albuquerque, Panorama Press, 1977), 147.
7. Franklin Folson, *The Life and Legend of George McJunkin* (New York/Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1973), 68, 77, 87, 96, 103; Richardson, 65-66.
8. Folson, 108; Richardson, 65-66; Monroe Billington, "Black History and New Mexico's Place Names," *Password*, XXIX, 3 (Fall, 1984), 110.
9. Interview in 1959 with Mr. and Mrs. Edward Collier, old timers in Raton, New Mexico. Mr. Collier had trailed with Al Jones and had swapped many tales with him.

(Notes continued on page 41.)